

Introductions

First impressions are often lasting impressions. This is true in life, and especially in writing. Your readers' first judgments, even if mistaken, about the value of the topic, your skill as a writer, and your character as a person have strong impact on their total response to your work.

If you get off to a good start, readers might have enough faith to stick with you through the rough spots, forgiving an occasional error or concentrating extra hard when you explain a complex idea. On the other hand, if readers don't see the importance of your topic or think you're uninformed, overly sentimental, or sarcastic, they'll continue to hold those impressions until you prove them false. They may even set your paper aside unread.

It might be helpful, therefore, to think of your introduction as a first meeting between you and your readers; It's the occasion at which you take the first steps toward building a strong relationship, one that will last at least for the rest of the paper.

If you see your introduction this way, you'll see also that no single pattern or format can meet the demands of every writing situation. For this reason, the suggestions below should be regarded as exactly that – suggestions. In some situations, they may not be helpful, but in others they may provide exactly the right approach for a particular purpose or reader.

- **Focus Your Reader's Attention**

Just because readers are people, they have individual interests, view points, preoccupations, and needs. Your memo on staff reorganization may come across your supervisor's desk just before an important luncheon meeting when she's hungry and a bit nervous. She may not have been thinking much about the idea you mentioned last week, and what she has been thinking may not have been in line with your thoughts.

In such a situation, you need to try seeing things from her point of view. You must reach beyond your personal perspective for the common ground you share. Having shown that you're sensitive to, and perhaps even share, the reader's needs, you'll be well poised to state your ideas.

Because this type of introduction gradually moves from a broad concern with general issues to a narrower range of interest stated in a thesis sentence, it's often referred to as a funnel.

Notice how the following introduction focuses attention on the thesis, the last sentence of the introduction.

During the past year, our sales have grown well beyond the level projected in last April's report, "A Regional Marketing and Sales Strategy." This success demonstrated that we have a good produce, a strong marketing plan, and an effective sales force in the field. Now, as planning for the coming year begins, it's time to consider how we can implement this strategy on a national level.

- **Begin With a Fact or Example**

By now, you understand the importance of concrete, specific details in your paper's body. Details can also be excellent ways of opening and closing, as they give your reader a concrete, specific connection to the subject.

Last July, Duke, a four-year-old Labrador retriever, was dragged behind a pickup truck on a rope and left to die on the desert. Fortunately, he was found and taken to the Humane Society where his wounds were treated, and he was gradually nursed back to health. Eventually, he was adopted by Bill and Linda, a young couple who say they couldn't imagine finding a better pet. Not all stories of animal abuse end as happily as Duke's, but the Humane Society works hard to help all animals in distress, and it deserves your support.

- **Note a Common Misconception**

If your readers were fully informed on your subject, there wouldn't be much need for them to read your essay. So, whether their misconceptions are due to lack of information, failure to draw valid conclusions from factual information, or some other reason, it's often helpful to acknowledge misunderstandings at the start. In doing so, you show that you're aware of these views, and also demonstrate why your paper is important: to correct these mistaken ideas and to bring about better understanding.

When I first tell people that I grew up without a father, they often express sympathy. It's true that I never had a dad to play catch with or teach me to fish, but I played catch with friends and learned to fish on my own. Actually, I found that growing up in a single-parent family has several advantages.

The sense of opposition generated by this type of introduction creates tension, and in doing so, sharpens and dramatized your ideas.

- **Raise a Question**

Explanations often begin as a result of trying to answer a question or solve a problem, and a thesis statement, especially in the early stages of writing, is often a tentative answer to a question that you want to explore. Why not share the question with your readers and invite them to join in the search for an answer?

Like many people my age, I limit my cholesterol intake, but recently I've learned that some cholesterol can actually be healthy for me. What exactly is cholesterol, and what does it do? How can I tell whether the cholesterol in a salmon steak is good or bad for me? To maintain a healthy blood cholesterol level, we should all understand what this chemical compound is and how it works in the human body.

- **Make a Bold Assertion**

Another way of saying this might be: Go out on a limb. Take a risk. Of course, this approach can be overdone and can lead to exhibitionism and sensationalism, especially if you're writing on a subject that demands caution and moderation. In those situations, this "Look, Ma, no hands!" approach could be a disaster.

The new fall television lineups are out, and they look like the same old trash: more violence, more insipid sitcoms, more hackneyed plots and one-dimensional characters. This is mind pollution, pure and simple. The American people deserve better programming from the major networks.