

Writing Tip Sheet: Introductions & Conclusions

Introductions

Openings

The opening of your paper should always try to catch the reader's attention. To that end, avoid the following openings:

- Empty sentences. Don't make empty statements. While a reader may agree with them, they do nothing to hook the reader and make him/her want to read on.

Architects face many challenges today. (While this may be true, if this is the first line of your paper, will it attract a reader's attention?)

- Stating the obvious. Don't bother to tell readers what they already know, especially with a first line.

If you are writing about the Empire State building:

The Empire State Building, located in New York City... (This is **not** compelling.)

- Dictionary definitions. Avoid dictionary definitions whenever possible.

According to Webster's Dictionary, architecture means... (Accurate, but does it catch the reader's attention?)

- Apologies and excuses. Don't apologize for your position, or your knowledge level, or what you're about to write. Do nothing that will undermine your reader's confidence in you.

Despite this author's lack of knowledge on this issue, it is clear... (Does this inspire the reader to trust you?)

You want to hook readers. You want to say something that gets their attention and makes them want to read on. Dive right into your issue. Say something startling. Don't give your reader any time to lose interest. Start with something that is concrete and definite, something a reader can see and react to. The more general and abstract you are (like in the examples above), the more difficult this will be. Some effective strategies are:

- Start with an anecdote. Relate a concrete story that pulls the reader in. This can be a story from personal experience or one you have heard about. Just be sure to offer a lot of good detail that shows the reader what is happening.
- Define your terms. While avoiding a dictionary definition, provide the reader with a clear understanding of what an abstract concept means to you. Too often with abstract terms we think we all know what they mean, but we all have slightly different definitions. So make sure the reader knows *exactly* what you mean.
- Describe something in detail. Describe a person, place, object, or situation. Use vivid detail. Put the reader into a situation or location. Appeal to his/her senses.
- Use interesting facts and figures. If you have good statistics and information, use them.
- Use quotations. If someone has said something interesting about your topic, or something controversial – use it. Just be sure to let the reader know the context and who is speaking.
- Pose a question. Be careful when you do this. Make sure the question you pose makes the reader stop and think. Empty questions can do more harm than good.

An introduction does not have to be a single paragraph. You can have an introductory section. However, keep the length of your intro proportional to the overall length of your paper.

Thesis Statement

Be sure to put your **thesis statement** (your controlling statement, your argument) somewhere in your introduction. Often, people look for theses as the final sentence of your introduction, although this is not an ironclad rule. Since your thesis is the most important line in the paper, make sure your reader sees it.

Since an introduction can be more than one paragraph, you do not automatically have to put your thesis in your first paragraph. Just keep in mind that it is a good idea to state your thesis as early as possible. If you wait several paragraphs, your reader may wonder: “What is this paper about?”

Regardless of where you put your thesis – it should be apparent to the reader. Don’t keep your reader guessing.

For more information about this topic, please see the tip sheet “Thesis Statements”.

Conclusions

Similar rules apply for conclusions as for introductions.

- Remind the reader what your main point is. Don’t repeat your thesis word for word, but do reiterate your argument in some way.
- End the essay in a memorable fashion. Send the reader away thinking. This can be done most of the ways listed under introduction (i.e. anecdotes, interesting facts, quotations, etc.). Whatever you do, don’t end with empty or clichéd lines.

Weak: Regardless of how the Big Dig turns out, one thing is for sure, by 2010, Boston will look different.

Stronger: Once strolling couples and playing children replace loud, air polluting cars, everyone will recognize the truth: the removal of the Central Artery was the best thing to ever happen to Boston.

Try to end on something fresh and original.

- Be careful **not** to simply summarize your entire paper in your conclusion. Don’t repeat what you just said – especially in a shorter essay. First of all, this makes it sound like you have run out of things to say. Secondly it can be insulting to the reader. In a 4-6 page essay, trust that the reader can remember what you said a couple of paragraphs earlier.

There are a variety of strategies to avoid repetition. Consider the following two:

- 1) Suggest a policy or a course of action. Instead of just saying the same thing over again, propose a solution, suggest what officials should do to solve the problem you've discussed.

While it may be interesting architecture, it's time Boston had a new City Hall. Officials must act now and rebuild this monstrosity.

- 2) Predict the future. What will happen if your proposal is not put into effect? What will this world look like? What will it look like if the proposal does get adopted?

Boston's City Hall Plaza has been a wasteland ever since it was first created. And as long as City Hall itself exists, the Plaza will continue to be this way, a hole in the fabric of the city.

- Do not apologize in any way for your lack of knowledge or for your opinion. While you don't want to sound arrogant, your own confidence can inspire the reader's confidence.
- Do not introduce entirely new material in the conclusion. You should be wrapping up or putting the finishing touches on your paper. Bringing up new issues only confuses things. The last thing you want is for your reader to be confused as he/she finishes your paper.

For more information about writing an essay, please see *Argument Structure, Thesis Statements, and Writing a Comparison Essay*.