

Writing Introductions

You've probably been told countless times that first impressions are important, right? Well, they are, especially when you're writing a paper, and even more so when you're writing one for a professor. You want to engage his/her interest, but you also want to give the impression that you know what you're talking about. And, as if that isn't enough, you also have to include a thesis (or a statement that tells the reader what you plan to argue, analyze, or discuss in the paper) *and* indicate the organization of your essay. For example, if you are writing about Countee Cullen's use of allegory, allusion, and the sonnet form in "From the Dark Tower," you should say so in your introduction, and the order in which you list the terms should reflect the order in which you will discuss them.

So it's probably safe to say that introductions need a lot of attention and a lot of work. However, many students spend very little time on them. They either assume that the body of the paper is most important because it will determine their grade; or they don't want to "tell everything" about their topic in the first paragraph. As one student pointed out, "There would be no reason to read the rest of the paper!" This is not true—your readers actually *appreciate* getting a heads-up on what your topic, and they may even need background information from you in order to understand the rest of your essay. Additionally, if it is written first, a good introduction can help guide *you* along as you write. After all, it is supposed to be your preview, so following it may keep you from going off on long tangents about unrelated things. In short, introductions are important, and they can be quite useful to both you and to the person reading your work. And remember, just like an important job interview, introductions should not be taken lightly; they are the first thing your reader will see, and they can often determine the way she responds to the rest of your paper.

Though the task may sound daunting, crafting an introduction is often easier than most students think. Here are some helpful tips:

- **Jump Right In!** Some students begin their papers with a flourish—they may use a funny anecdote, an interesting quote, shocking statistical evidence, or even a bold question related to the topic. However, if you're not entirely comfortable with that, then just start with the subject itself. Although you should definitely entice your reader's curiosity and get them interested in what you have to say, you can do that in a number of ways, and the one that makes you feel most comfortable is probably the one that will work best with your paper and your writing style.
- **Statements like "Since the beginning of time" may sound good, but they are neither innovative nor helpful in providing information for your reader** (most professors get *at least* one of these openings a semester). Additionally, if your paper isn't a complete history of life on earth, such statements are too broad. Start

in the ballpark of your topic—that way, you can easily segue into a thesis statement and beyond.

- **Always include the titles and authors of the works you will be discussing in detail.** For example, if you are writing a paper about Langston Hughes’ “Harlem”, include that in your introduction—readers need to know such information and, at any rate, if the introduction is written comprehensively, it will appear without any extraneous effort from you.
- **Although many introductions are written first, some students find it helpful to write them last.** This is because, after the rest of the paper has been written, its structure helps to organize and give focus to the introduction. Additionally, once you know what your paper will include, you may be better able to write an opening that is much more informative. However, if you follow this method, be sure to check your paper against your introduction, and make sure it doesn’t include things that you have forgotten to mention.
- **Don’t be afraid to revise as you work.** If your essay topic has expanded, or if you’ve decided to leave some things out, check your introduction to make sure the changes are reflected in it. If they are not, they need to be integrated.