

INTRODUCTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This guide is written for students who are having trouble writing effective introductions and/or conclusions, and for students who would like to write more effective introductions and conclusions.

You already know that introductions are an especially important aspect of papers. You may spend a lot of time and effort trying to come up with a "catchy" opening sentence, having been taught that you want to "grab" your readers' attention. A more productive way to think about introductions—and to judge their effectiveness—is to focus on how well the entire introduction sets the stage for the body of the paper that follows. From the perspective of readers, an introduction establishes a set of expectations about what they are going to find in this text. So strong are these expectations that a reader will hold onto them—and even use them to critique a paper—even when it becomes obvious that what the paper is actually doing is not what they expected it to do! Clearly, if your paper is to be successful, the introduction has to set expectations that are congruent with the paper you have written.

It would be very nice if there were some simple formulas for writing introductions and conclusions—but, unfortunately, there are no quick and simple rules. In fact, a good writer can come up with several introductions or conclusions for the same paper, any of which would work equally well. So you do not have to abandon the idea of finding a "creative" opening. But if you want to write truly effective introductions and conclusions your overriding concern has got to be satisfying the **functions** that these segments of text have. The rest of this handout is devoted to explaining these functions, and providing you with strategies you can use to meet these needs of your readers.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

GUIDELINE 1. Write your introduction and conclusion **AFTER** you have written the body of your paper.

The basis for this guideline is very simple: it is much easier to introduce your main point, and to conclude it, when you know what your main point is.

Some authors begin writing a paper by spending hours writing and rewriting their first page. In essence what these writers are doing is figuring out what they are going to say in the rest of the paper. If this strategy works for you, there is no reason to change your writing process. But you should be aware that there are easier ways to decide the main point of a paper. Yes, you do need to develop a specific focus for a paper as you are working out your ideas, but Writing Center consultants can tell you about freewriting, brainstorming, creating maps of the territory, and other strategies you can use to pinpoint your main idea without, first, having to write a polished, perfect introduction.

GUIDELINE 2: Think about introductions and conclusions as bridges.

One helpful way to think about introductions is to see them as a bridge you are building between your readers (and what your readers think about your topic) and what you are saying about the topic in the body of your paper.

Similarly, it is helpful to think about conclusions as bridges you are building between your specific idea about your subject and the "world of ideas" that other people have about your subject.

It can be even more helpful to think of yourself and your readers as sharing a particular context. This context is the social environment in which you are working together to share information on a subject of mutual interest, or to discuss common concerns or problems. When you are writing a paper for a class, that class is the obvious and immediate context. Since college courses are designed to introduce you to the work of academic disciplines, those disciplines or subdisciplines form a more general context for your papers (microbiology, social psychology, European history, American literature, et al.). When you are writing more "formal" papers, your readers could well be members of one of these disciplines. From this perspective, introductions and conclusions are bridges you are consciously building between the "world" of your text, and the "world" of the context you and your readers share.

The trick to thinking about introductions and conclusions as bridges is distancing yourself from your own ideas enough so that you can see them in relation to their context. Pulling yourself away from your paper far enough so that you can see it as something outside of yourself can be difficult. Here are some strategies you can use to distance yourself from your own ideas:

- Put your paper away for a day or two.

This simple device will allow you to forget what you meant. When you read your paper again, you will be dependent on what is in writing, just the way your readers are dependent on what is actually said.

- Focus on your readers and the context you share with them.

Think about the course for which you are writing this paper, and, if it is relevant, the discipline that lies behind it. Then freewrite, answering these questions:

- What general knowledge and information do my readers already have about my main idea?
- What are the typical or common views about my idea that my readers have? What attitudes or views about my idea do my readers share with me? Is my view of the subject different from that of my readers? If so, in what way or ways?
- Define the context you share with readers in terms of your common interests, concerns, or problems (intellectual and otherwise) you are seeking to understand and resolve. In what way or ways does the body of your paper connect or relate to this common ground?

With this general approach in mind, you are ready to consider some specific guidelines for introductions and conclusions.

INTRODUCTIONS: SOME GUIDELINES

Introductions to papers have the same purposes or functions as introductions in oral communication situations (meeting strangers at parties, learning about what a course will cover from what a teacher says on the first day of class, learning about the background of a speaker before he or she delivers a formal lecture).

We will consider four main functions of an introduction.

An introduction

- orients your readers
- prepares your readers for the specific ideas you will be presenting in the body of your paper
- establishes the significance of your main idea
- sets the appropriate tone for your paper

Before we consider these four main points, a warning: titles of papers are not a substitute for material that must appear in your introduction. The title of a paper (like the title of a magazine article or the title of a lecture) is there to flag the attention of people who might be interested in the topic. Write your introduction as if the paper had no title.

SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

One of the main objectives Charles Dickens had in writing his novel Hard Times (1854) was to expose the serious limitations of utilitarianism. This philosophy, proselytized by John Stuart Mill (1806-73), contends that all decisions we make, both in our personal and our public lives, should be rational conclusions reached by a logical assessment of the facts. In Hard Times utilitarianism underlies the pedagogy of Gradgrind and his M'Choakum-child school; and Louisa, Gradgrind's daughter and one of his pupils, has learned her lesson all too well. Her decision to marry Bounderby is a utilitarian one. As the novel reveals, however, the marriage was a grave mistake. Louisa fails to reach the goals the marriage promised. More importantly, her efforts to follow her father's exhortations to suppress her imagination and ignore her feelings make her one of the novel's most psychologically complex characters.

AN INTRODUCTION ORIENTS YOUR READER

If you follow the advice to write your introduction after you have completed the body of your text, you will be thoroughly immersed in the subject matter. Human nature being what it is, it is all too easy to (unconsciously) assume that your readers, too, have been equally preoccupied with this topic. To write an effective introduction, you must remind yourself that, no matter how well acquainted your readers may be with your subject matter, they still need to be oriented to this particular paper.

A good way to remind yourself about this basic need of your readers is to assume that, in the two or three hours before they pick up your paper, their conscious attention has been a million miles away from your topic. Imagine, for example, that a reader played a quick game or two of tennis, then drove around attending to household errands, then was concerned with fixing dinner.

One of your tasks in writing your introduction, then, is to pull your readers' attention away from such mundane matters, and gently but definitely focusing it on the topic of your paper. From the perspective of reading specialists, this orientation function means signaling readers which

parts of their memory banks they need to access and to open in order to make sense of the body of your paper.

One simple but important strategy you can use to be sure your introduction satisfactorily orients your readers is to provide key facts, details and vocabulary. For example, give the names (preferably, the full names) of people you will be talking about. If your paper focuses on works (books or poems or paintings, for example) be sure to give the titles of these works (again, preferably the full titles). Providing dates can be a good way to orient your readers to the time frame of your paper. Certainly you will want to include terms that are going to figure prominently in your paper. (The sample introduction above shows you how you can even provide a quickie definition of key concepts.) You can see how each of these details gives your readers important information about which parts of their knowledge banks they have to open in order to comprehend the text of your paper.

AN INTRODUCTION PREPARES YOUR READER FOR THE MAIN POINT OF YOUR PAPER

No matter how knowledgeable your readers may be about the general subject matter of your text, we can guarantee that they do not know your thinking about this topic. Providing this information is, after all, the primary function of the paper itself. So another central function of an introduction is to let readers know exactly how you are approaching this subject matter, and, very often, the main point you are going to make about it (thesis statement or claim).

Closely related to the orientation function of the introduction, preparing your readers for your main point can perhaps best be understood if we go back to the image of the bridge. The introduction is a bridge you are constructing to take your readers from their bank of the river (their knowledge, assumptions, and attitudes about your subject or topic) to your bank of the river (the point of view and ideas you'll be covering in the body of your paper).

Again, there are no "rules" about the length of an introduction. Here are the two salient factors you need to balance. Your readers are eager to know exactly what you are going to be doing in this paper, what you have to say about the topic. But they also need to be properly oriented. SO—you want to make your bridge as short as possible. At the same time, you need to provide a solid flooring for it so that your readers don't lose their footing and plunge into the river! Take a look at the sample introduction, and notice how each sentence carefully moves readers step-by-step toward the specific focus of the text.

Here are some strategies you can use to build this bridge:

- Go back to the freewriting you did about the context for which you are writing. Look for the point where the river between the territory of your text and the territory of your readers is narrowest. To make your bridge as short as possible, you want to begin construction on common ground you already share with your readers. In other words, you want to look for points where your approach/ideas/concerns come closest to those of your readers. In addition to keeping your introduction short, this approach has another major advantage. It increases your authority and credibility by telling your readers that you see yourself as a member of the group that you are addressing.
- Here's another way to approach the same issue. Ask yourself this question: what line of thought would most quickly take my readers from where they are to where I need for them to be?

- Never forget that an introduction is an OVERVIEW. A common trap is getting into too much detail or explanation. Watch for this trap, and move any such detailed explanations into the body of the paper.

NOTE: In addition to letting your readers know exactly how you have approached your material and/or the main point you will be making, there may be occasions when you will also want to include a road map of the paper. That is, there may be occasions when you will want to give readers explicit information about how you've structured the paper ("In the first section of my text I will lay out some basic details about recent conflicts between the Fantés and the Yolongs. From there I will present the most common theories of nationalism. . ."). Such road maps tend to be most useful to readers under the following three conditions: (1) when a paper is long (say fifteen or more pages), (2) when the text divides up into separable sections, and (3) when it may not be obvious to readers how the sections of the text fit together into an organic whole.

Before we leave this section, I want to say a few more words about the openings of introductions.

- It should be obvious by now, but it is worth making explicit: generally speaking, you will place your main point/thesis statement/claim at the END of the introduction, NOT at the beginning. Since your readers expect you to orient them and prepare them for your main point, they will read your opening sentences as aspects of SHARED knowledge, not a specific point you intend to make!
- It is not unusual for inexperienced writers to begin their introductions with statements that are huge generalizations, or statements that go way back in time: "Since humankind emerged from caves, we have always wanted. . ." or "One central function of literature has always been to critique society. . . ."

These types of statements tend to irritate sophisticated readers, giving them a poor impression of the writer. At best, sophisticated readers consider such statements banal; at worst, readers consider them unwarranted generalizations. Finally, such statements imply that the writer shares very little common ground with these readers. Readers begin to wonder, then, if this writer has anything meaningful to say about their specific interests. So I'll reiterate the importance of finding as much common ground with readers as legitimately exists, and starting the bridge of your introduction from that point.

- Finally, there is that matter of that "catchy" opening that "grabs" readers' attention. The trouble with this little rubric—which is really most relevant to headlines in popular magazines—is that it fails to consider the issue of attention in any meaningful way. (And it can really throw off the tone of a text!) In the section on orienting readers, we have already spoken about the need to tell readers where they should focus their attention. The other important aspect of the readers' attention has to do with their engagement with the content of your text. People give serious and thoughtful attention to matters that they consider important or significant. Thus another function of introductions is establishing the significance of your approach and thinking, so let's turn to that issue now.

AN INTRODUCTION ESTABLISHES THE SIGNIFICANCE OF YOUR MAIN IDEA

We assume that you've spent time working on a paper because you considered the topic important enough and meaningful enough to warrant this expenditure of energy. Moreover, in the real world (if not always in the classroom) writers write because they have decided they have

something valuable or important to share with others. However, just because your approach to your topic is meaningful to you, you cannot assume that your readers will automatically see it as meaningful. So another obligation you have in introducing your paper is to be sure your readers see how your approach and your ideas are—or could be—of interest or concern to them.

In the Writing Center, we call this responding to the "so what?" question:

Bees dance to indicate where the other bees in the hive can find pollen.

Japan has a better balance of trade than does the U.S.

So what? Who cares? What difference does it make?

These questions are not facetious. People give serious thought and consideration to things that are of direct interest to them, to things they consider valuable or important. Although you may respond to the "so what?" question in more detail in your conclusion (see the following section of this handout), you need to consider it when you are writing your introduction.

If you examine the introductions to the scholarly writing you are required to read for your courses, you will find that responding to the "so what?" question often provides the writer with the basic structure for his/her introduction. Beginning with a concise statement of a mutually-shared concern/interest/intellectual problem, and briefly establishing its importance to the group, the writer then situates his/her focal point into this specific context.

While most social workers agree that child abuse is a growing problem, they are less sure about ways to prevent it. In this paper I will examine a treatment program that has been used very successfully in changing the behavior of child abusers, offering reasons why it seems to be so effective.

In making sure your introduction addresses the issue of significance, you'll want to turn again to the freewriting you did about the context of your paper, paying particular attention to your answers to the question about this group's common interests, and the way or ways your central focus relates to this common ground. You may want to do some further freewriting, talking to yourself about how you became interested in the topic, and/or recording the question that you asked yourself when you were investigating this topic:

--how can child abuse be prevented?

--precisely how does DMSO work?

In those cases where your focal point seems to be less obviously related to the concerns of your readers, you may want to address the "so what?" question more explicitly.

AN INTRODUCTION SETS THE APPROPRIATE TONE FOR YOUR PAPER

The tone of a piece of prose is the more intangible "atmosphere" you create. Specifically, tone refers to the attitude or stance you take to your readers and to your subject matter. In addition to orienting readers and preparing them for your main idea, your introduction establishes the stance you are going to take throughout the paper. It is vital that, in the introduction, you establish the right tone. If you are "cute and jokey" in your introduction, readers are going to assume that this is the stance you will maintain throughout the paper. If you talk about your subject in the body of your paper in a serious and thoughtful way, then the tone of your introduction has to be serious and thoughtful.

We are now going to consider conclusions. However, you may want to stop here for a moment and try some of these strategies on an introduction to a paper you are writing.

Remember:

An introduction builds a bridge from where your readers are to where you want them to be when they start the body of your paper.

An introduction:

- orients your reader
- prepares your reader for the specific idea you will be presenting in the body of your paper
- establishes the significance of your main idea
- sets the appropriate tone for your paper

If you decide to be "creative," be sure your efforts satisfy these four functions of an introduction!

CONCLUSIONS: SOME GUIDELINES

As is the case with introductions, writing an effective conclusion requires a writer to look at the main point of a paper within the larger social context in which and for which it has been written. Again, in writing your conclusion you'll have to keep in mind the functions of this segment of a paper. Basically, a conclusion responds to two needs and expectations of readers:

- it provides readers with a sense of closure
- it addresses the "so what?" question by discussing the ramifications or implications of what the writer has said in the body of the paper

A CONCLUSION PROVIDES A SENSE OF CLOSURE

Conclusions should give readers a sense of a stopping place where they can rest and reflect on the points the writer just made in the text. Typically, this sense of closure is provided by the writer's summing up his/her main point(s). As is the case with most rhetorical decisions that writers have to make, common sense should prevail. The amount of space you will need to devote to such summing-up will depend on these factors: (1) the length of the body of the text, (2) the complexity of the argument or picture that has been presented, (3) whether or not you explicitly stated your main point or conclusion in your introduction.

If it has been carefully written, a short paper of 2-3 pages will require very little summation; after all, your readers just read it! On the other hand, a paper that runs 20 or 30 pages is going to require more summation because the writer will want to pull together the various points he/she has made into an organic whole.

A CONCLUSION ADDRESSES THE RAMIFICATIONS OR IMPLICATIONS OF WHAT YOU'VE SAID IN YOUR PAPER

The other function of a conclusion picks up the significance issue discussed in the section on introductions. At this point, you will have spelled out your thinking for your readers, so the "so what?" question for readers becomes: "OK. So I'm willing to accept your point that Jefferson was a hypocrite [or Peru mishandled its balance of trade, or whatever your main point was]. Now, what do you want me to do with this idea?"

The issue of ramifications and implications can be tricky for writers of college papers. In the "real" world of written communication, writers are normally inspired to compose papers because they believe they have something of value or importance to add to the conversation that is going on among those people who constitute the group they are addressing. In the conclusion the writer then focuses on this matter, explaining how the point he has made, or the approach he has taken, either reinforces knowledge or methodologies the group already has, or suggests changes in them. Again, to see this at work, take a look at the conclusions of scholarly articles you are reading for your courses.

In cases where you feel you have a good grasp of the way experts in the field look at the topic you've covered in your paper, you should feel confident in expressing the implications or ramifications of your work. If, for example, your research on vitamin C suggests that large doses of this vitamin are, at best, ineffective, and may even be dangerous, then you may want to spell out a couple of ramifications: more research on this issue is called for, and, meantime, consumers should be urged to stop wasting their money on vitamin C supplements.

In cases where you feel less knowledgeable about the field as a whole, draw on the context of your course for implications and ramifications. How does the point you've made fit into what you've been studying, discussing, reading in class? Does your main point relate to other subjects or works you've covered? Does it apply to basic themes and/or assumptions the class has been making? Another way to approach this issue would be to talk about ramifications or implications at a personal level: did this investigation/analysis change your own views of the subject? has it affected your understanding of other works or issues?

A simple strategy I use to discover the implications/ramifications of papers I have written is this. When the paper is complete (except for conclusion), I find a quiet spot where I won't be distracted and simply read the whole text. When I reach the end, I make notes on the thoughts that have popped into my head regarding the "so what? who cares? what difference does it make?" questions.

A CAUTION: Our discussion has to end with a warning about what I call the "red bow" approach to conclusions. The image here is that of wrapping up the paper as if it were a gift, with the red bow as the finishing touch. The "red bow" approach manifests itself in a couple of ways. One mirrors the problem discussed in the section on introductions, that of beginning too broadly, or too far back in time. In talking about ramifications or implications, you don't want to generalize too broadly or too absolutely ("Thus Thomas Jefferson is the greatest philosopher America has had"). Which brings us to the other trap you want to avoid, which is implying (or stating) that your point of view is the only legitimate one, that nobody needs to bother visiting this issue again because you have resolved it, forever and always. If you look carefully at the conclusions scholars make, you'll notice that they usually limit the scope of the ramifications they discuss, and take a stance that is both open-minded and cautious. You'll rarely, if ever, see them stating that they've "proved" something. Rather, they use verbs such as *seem*, *indicate*, *suggest*, *imply*, often further qualified with modals such as *may* or *could*. Typically they invite their fellow scholars to do more research in this area. You would be wise to adopt this more cautious and reflective tone.

I will myself conclude this section on conclusions by reminding you that writing effective conclusions is not easy. Writers need to have quite a bit of sensitivity to their readers' needs and expectations, as well as the context for which and in which they are writing. It takes time and experience to develop this sensitivity. Take risks. Experiment. And pay close attention to your readers' responses. If we never take risks, we may not fail—but we may also not grow as writers.