



Writing Effective Introductions



Do not use this handout as a replacement for your assignment description. Use it as a supplement to help understand the basic expectations of your assigned genre, but **always** defer to the specific assignment description given to you by your instructor.

IMPORTANT DISCLAIMER

What is an Introduction?

Introductions and conclusions have fixed places in any essay. Depending on the length of the paper required by the instructor, introductions are usually one paragraph or a few. The introductory paragraph(s) guide the reader into the paper, frame the conversation, highlight your topic's importance to society and preview the rest of the paper.

Many introductions to academic papers resemble an inverted pyramid: they move from a more general overview of a topic and become more specific until they finally arrive at the thesis statement at the end of the paragraph(s).

Types of Introductory Hooks

Because the first sentence of your introduction is the first chance you have to capture the attention of the reader, it is called a "hook." Below are examples of "hooks" you can use to begin your paper.

1. **Definition:** Instead of going with a dictionary definition of a concept or paraphrasing one from your readings, lead readers to your own ideas.

EXAMPLE

Most people think that theological studies are mainly debating about the nature of God and not applicable to the general society. But this field of study is much wider, encompassing social justice, governmental policy and even our own identities.

2. **Surprising fact:** This usually consists of statistics, written laws or policies or historical facts.

EXAMPLE

Slavery was initially illegal in the colony of Georgia. It was not until after Georgia became a state that slavery was legalized.¹

OR

As many as three out of every four African American young men growing up in Washington, D.C. today will be incarcerated at some point in their lifetime.²

3. **Anecdote:** Recounting a personal observation, experience or event always interests readers because we all love stories. Make sure it is relevant to your topic.

EXAMPLE

I have been the lead pastor of my East Atlanta church for more than a decade, so I know all my members very well. One day I noticed a new face—a young woman with sad, tired eyes, a young child clinging to her and an infant in her arms. She did not introduce herself and so I...

OR

In the border-church where I pastor, most of my congregants are Mexican Americans. Despite my encouragement to take pride in both parts of their identities, I notice that their lived realities often force them to choose to be either a Mexican or an American, depending on their location and company.

4. **An opinion you question:** Challenging commonly-held understandings of the world, popular values and beliefs always succeeds in grabbing attention, because it questions readers' worldview.

EXAMPLE

The Bible does not specifically state anywhere that three magi came to visit baby Jesus. Nor does it say that they were kings, or that their names were Casper, Melchior, and Balthazar. Yet almost every child growing up Christian hears this story...

5. **Humor:** Jokes can be used to both grab the listener's attention and introduce the main theme of a sermon. As biblical scholar Albín Masarik points out, they should be amiable, culturally and religiously acceptable, and agreeable to both religious and non-religious readers and listeners.³ In analyzing Slovak pastor Anton Fabian's homily-introductions based on jokes, Masarik offers the following illustrations:

¹ Young, Jeffrey. "Slavery in Antebellum Georgia." *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, last modified Sep 30, 2020. <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/slavery-in-antebellum-georgia/>

² Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010), 6-7.

³ Masarik, Albín. "The Use of a Joke in Introductions to Anton Fabian's Homilies," *The Expository Times* 128, no. 10 (2017): 491–496.

EXAMPLE

A homeless man was walking by a beautiful convertible in an open-air mode. He patted the owner's shoulder and said, "I see that you, too, are without a shelter." The homeless man is, indeed, wise because, what the roof is for the house, the body is for the human soul.

OR

A cardiologist saw his long-time patient, an older man, and asked, "How is your darling heart?" The old man said, "She's at home cooking." But if we went to heaven and asked God the same question, [God] could answer, "Great! Right now, it is on the earth!"

Avoid These in Introductions

- Beginning with an overly broad statement. Ex.: For the last two millennia, Christians the world over have wondered...
- Defining words using a dictionary. Instead, write your own definitions as informed by the scholarly works you are using in the rest of your paper.
- Presenting too much information. Don't try to prove your argument or include extensive background information before you've gotten to your thesis statement.

Ending the Introductory paragraph(s)

The last sentence of an introductory paragraph or about 5-7 sentences of a multi-paragraph introduction should give a thesis statement, your motive for examining the issue, the significance of your topic to current society, [the paper structure and organization](#) and the sub-topics that you will be discussing.

EXAMPLE

Because of the centrality of slavery in the development of Black spirituality, I argue that the story of the black church is a tale of struggle in the midst of continual oppression. At the same time, it is also a story of steady change and inclusion of peoples from very diverse communities in Africa. I begin (or "The paper begins") by examining the antebellum and the reconstruction history of the United States. I then move on to probing the judicial and policy...