Introductions

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER BEFORE YOU WRITE YOUR INTRODUCTION

What is the purpose of this paper?

The information you include in your introduction depends on the purpose of your paper. Are you writing: A research paper, meant to inform you audience about a particular subject? A lab report, meant to explain your experiment and summarize the results? An opinion essay in which you attempt to persuade your reader to share your views? Different types of papers require different introductions.

How does my audience feel about my topic?

Once you know the purpose of your paper, you must figure out how to best communicate that purpose to your audience. Because the introduction is the first thing your audience will read, it sets the tone for the rest of your paper. Consider what your audience will need to understand and engage with the rest of your content. Are they unfamiliar with your topic and in need of background information? Do they need to know what other scholars have said on this topic? Do they need to be drawn in to your argument with a vivid anecdote or example? Your introduction gives your audience the information they need to decide if they should keep reading.

How long is my paper?

This seems like a simple question, but the length of your paper will affect what you include in your introduction. If your paper is long (10+ pages), you might have a multi-paragraph introductory section. If it is short (1-2 pages), you don't want to waste space repeating information contained in the body of your essay.

ORGANIZING THE INTRODUCTION

Below are some strategies for organizing your introduction. Which you choose will depend on your topic, audience, and discipline.

Summary: give the reader the background they need to understand your paper. This works best if your target audience is fairly uninformed about your subject.
Funnel: make a broad statement about the topic, then narrower statements, and conclude with your thesis.
History of Controversy: Summarize what other people have argued about your topic, then point to a gap in the conversation and promise to fill it with your thesis.
Objections: summarize your opponents' objections, then refute them one-by-one in your essay. For obvious reasons, this works best for persuasive papers.

HOW TO BEGIN

Once you have decided what you want to accomplish with your introduction and how you will organize it, consider using one of the following strategies to engage your reader.

- Ask rhetorical question
- Cite a hard-hitting or unusual fact
- Cite pithy, relevant quote
- Describe a vivid image or tell a brief anecdote
- Identify a problem
- State your thesis, concisely and unapologetically
- Show your reader a contradiction or paradox

Conclusions

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER BEFORE YOU WRITE YOUR CONCLUSION

What are my disciplinary standards?

Most instructors will say that a good conclusion is meant to "wrap up" a paper, but what this actually means will vary by discipline. In some fields, a simple summary of your key points is all that is required. More often, though, a conclusion will reiterate a thesis and invite the reader to carry the ideas forward in some way. Before your write your conclusion, figure out what the standards for your discipline are, either by asking your instructor or reading a variety of published texts in your field.

What do I want my reader to take away from my essay?

Think back to the purpose of your paper that you identified when writing your introduction and consider how the conclusion can help you fulfill that purpose. If your paper is meant to inform, your conclusion should summarize key information and point the reader towards additional research. If your essay is persuasive, your conclusion might direct your reader to some form of action. If the essay is part of a scholarly conversation, your conclusion should let your reader know what your perspective adds to the field.

Why is this paper important?

If you're still not sure of the purpose of your essay, brainstorm answers to the following questions: what have I contributed here? How has my work helped resolve or create a better understanding of the original problem? What are the broader implications of my research, ideas, or arguments?

Once you have answered these questions, you can consider how your paper might relate to a larger issue, narrative, or conversation. Depending on your field and type of essay, this issue could be very large (American race relations) or quite small (the scholarly conversation about economics in 20th century crime novels). Either way, though, the connection should matter to your audience.

How long is my paper?

Just like with introductions, the length and content of the conclusion varies with the length and content of the paper. If your paper is long (10+ pages) you may need a multi-paragraph concluding section. If it is short (1-2 pages) your reader will probably not need to be reminded of everything they have just read.

HOW TO END

As with introductory forms, which of these you choose depends on your discipline, topic, and audience. Most conclusions connect the author's argument to a broader topic or issue that matters to their audience. The key is finding a connection that is neither too narrow (uninteresting) nor too broad (pointless).

Implications: explain the implications of your argument for an issue that matters to your audience.
Anecdote or image: use a brief story or image that summarizes your key points. You might also consider returning to a narrative or image that you mentioned in your introduction. This can work particularly well for more personal assignments.
Call to action: let your readers know what specific actions they can take to remedy a problem and support your viewpoint.
Practical applications: if your paper is scientific or technical, explain how your ideas might be applied to solve practical problems.
Recommendations: if your research has identified a problem or an information gap, give some recommendations for solutions or areas that need further research.
Speculate: consider how your argument might change in the future or make predictions about how certain patterns might play out.