**Introductions and Conclusions: The Two Hardest Paragraphs to Write**

**Introductions**

One way to survey the range of options available for hooking your audience with an interesting opening is to look through our reader and see what other writers have done, imitating the ones you like. Another way is to consider these traditional favorites (listed below). Note that some of these also have titles that work as “hooks” to grab the reader’s attention, and your title should do the same. Also, some of these examples combine different introduction strategies, such as a question and a definition, or an anecdote enhanced by description.

1) **A surprising statement** (a startling fact, statistic, or a statement that contradicts expectations)

From “In Praise of the Maligned Sweatshop” By Nicholas Kristof

Africa desperately needs Western help in the form of schools, clinics and sweatshops. Oops, don't spill your coffee. We in the West mostly despise sweatshops as exploiters of the poor, while the poor themselves tend to see sweatshops as opportunities.

2) **An anecdote** that illustrates or leads into your main idea.

From “Sex, Lies, and Conversation” by Mary Tannen

I was addressing a small gathering in a suburban Virginia living room—a women’s group that had invited men to join them. Throughout the evening, one man had been particularly talkative, frequently offering ideas and anecdotes, while his wife sat silently beside him on the couch. Toward the end of the evening, I commented that women frequently complain that their husbands don’t talk to them. This man quickly concurred. He gestured toward his wife and said, “She’s the talker in our family.” The room burst into laughter; the man looked puzzled and hurt. “It’s true,” he explained. “When I come home from work I have nothing to say. If she didn’t keep the conversation going, we’d spend the whole evening in silence.” This episode crystallizes the irony that although American men tend to talk more than women in public situations, they often talk less at home. And this pattern is wreaking havoc with marriage. [note that the last line goes from the funny little story to the “so what?” question, intended to compel the readers to read the rest, once they’re hooked by the opening.]

3) **A definition** that clarifies and/or intrigues the audience enough to read what else you have to say on the subject. (Note: Do not define a word that everyone knows unless you can introduce a new way of looking at that term.)

From “Friends, Hook-ups, Boyfriends, and Soul Mates” (OK, I’m making this one up, but I have read discussions of this issue.)

At what point does a hook-up become a boyfriend? Or are these entirely different, mutually-exclusive categories? Of course, in ancient times before the age of MySpace, the boyfriend/girlfriend status used to be a fairly distinct stage of courtship—a stage defined by a question posed by the young man to the young lady, “Do you want to go steady?” The current generation of young people, however, has abandoned this custom entirely, and now a more subtle reading of signals is needed for couples interested in each other to determine where they stand. Some would regard this as progress, but many see it as a minefield threatening the future of the species.

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For an essay about contemporary college students’ response (or lack of it) to current political controversies, especially the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, inspired by a *Spartan Daily* column called, I think, “Raging Grannies.”

If “active” is the opposite of “passive,” shouldn’t “activist” be the opposite of “pacifist” (which after all sounds like “passive,” even if it’s actually derived from “pacific,” meaning “peaceful”)? Does this mean we need a new term for pacifists who agitate against our current wars? How about “warriors for peace”? This label might fit a group that calls itself the “Raging Grannies.” The old ladies in this group, despite their name, don’t actually “rage against the machine” like the hippies in the 60’s; instead, they use humor, playful street theater, and self-mockery to get people to question our war-machine economy. But shouldn’t it be college students out there getting involved and righting wrongs they themselves will suffer from? Why is it grannies? This is the question raised by both Andrea Frainier and Thomas Friedman in their respective newspaper columns. [and here you’d probably put a summary of their points before developing your own thesis.]

4) A **quotation** that frames the issue in an interesting way.

Bernard Shaw, the second greatest playwright in the English language, never went to college himself, but he seemed to have a keen understanding of the paradox that makes the freshman year of college such a challenge when he proclaimed that “freedom means responsibility: that is why most men dread it.”

5) A **description** that attracts the reader’s interest and sets the tone of the essay. From an essay called “The Hopeful Generation” (OK, I’m making this one up too, but the story is real.)

The last question addressed by the learned panel came from a tiny child, maybe 5 or six years old, who had to crane her neck upward to point her small voice at the microphone. The audience and the distinguished panelists took in the pink scarf stylishly draped around her neck and the serious set of her little shoulders. “Who brought this adorable little moppet to this serious discussion of the plight of women and girls in the third world today?” we wondered. What would such a tyke have to say after the grim facts we had heard about infant mortality rates, little girls of 8 or 9 being married off to middle-aged men to settle a family debt, daughters being starved so their brothers could be well fed, female infanticide, even? Well, her question floored us all in its heartbreaking simplicity: “What can *I* do?”

**Advice about Conclusions: Why They Matter:** Introductions and conclusions are both the hardest and the most important paragraphs to write, for most writers because they must answer the “so what” question, establishing the importance of the topic for the reader.

One writing instructor explains it this way: “Just as your introduction acts as a bridge that transports your readers from their own lives into the ‘place’ of your analysis, your conclusion can provide a bridge to help your readers make the transition back to their daily lives. Such a conclusion will help them see why all your analysis and information should matter to them after they put the paper down. [. . . .] The conclusion allows you to have the final say on the issues you have raised in your paper, to summarize your thoughts, to demonstrate the importance of your ideas, and to propel your reader to a new view of the subject. It is also your opportunity to make a good final impression and to end on a positive note. [. . . .] The conclusion pushes beyond the boundaries of the prompt and allows you to consider broader issues, make new connections, and elaborate on the significance of your findings.” Note the **audience-focused approach!**

(Quoted from The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/conclusions.html>)

**Strategies for Conclusions:**

1. **Return to themes and/or strategies you used to hook the reader in the introduction**. If you started with an anecdote, you can finish it in the conclusion. If you made an unusual definition, you can return to that idea. If you described a problem, you can offer a solution.
2. **Open it out by showing broader implications**.For instance, if you are discussing international responses to the earthquake destruction in Haiti, you could end by suggesting that the disaster might be a wake-up call to all countries subject to earthquakes to improve building standards and tighten inspections.
3. **Strive to create a last line with punch**. It doesn’t need to be funny, but saving a great quote or provocative detail from your research can make an effective last impression.

**Strategies to Avoid:**

1. **Merely summarizing** what came before and restating your thesis. This is tedious and anticlimactic for the reader, an abdication of your role to bring out the significance of what you have said up to that point.
2. **Undercutting** the rest of your paper with a defeatist or weakening statement, such as, “Of course, this problem has always been with humanity, so it probably always will.” Or “Hopefully, a more people become aware of this problem, things will start to change.”
3. **New beginning or sidetrack**. In an effort to avoid mere summary, some students veer off in a different direction altogether, derailing the main thrust of the paper.