

Writing Introductions for Essays

Essay introductions should attract the reader and provide some information about what is to come. However, how you begin your essay depends on your rhetorical situation, which refers to your academic purpose and audience. The introduction typically provides your argument and context for that argument by explaining how your work fits into a larger conversation, addresses specific questions, or explores a new aspect of the subject.

Consider your rhetorical situation.

Understanding the assignment is imperative to your success. Consider why you are writing, what your writing should accomplish, and what your stance on your topic is. Think about the purpose of your assignment. Is your instructor evaluating your creativity, critical thinking skills, writing ability, or knowledge of a topic? In your essay, are you supposed to persuade, explain, or entertain? Are you asked to analyze, compare, prove, or describe something? Think about whom your audience is. You will want to present evidence your audience will find persuasive and avoid repeating information they already know. You also need to choose the appropriate language.

Open your essay in an engaging way.

The opening of your essay should generate interest about the topic. Often students are advised to begin broad, and they take this to mean that a sweeping statement—like “Sports mean many things to many people”—makes a good opener. But such sweeping claims do little to help readers focus their attention on your argument. Instead, consider an opening strategy that will engage your audience in your subject, disposing them to listen to the argument.

A Quotation

Because this method is often overused and poorly used, make sure to choose an appropriate quotation that directly or indirectly relates to your topic. Your explanation should provide relevant background and contextual information.

Opening a Political Discussion with a Quotation

If there is a single point of consensus in this heated political moment, it is that everyone loves the Constitution. “Conservative or liberal, we are all constitutionalists,” Barack Obama wrote in *The Audacity of Hope*. Ted Cruz, the junior senator from Texas, who emerged as a principal antagonist of the President’s during the government shutdown, has often said much the same thing. The Founding Fathers, Cruz said, “fought and bled for freedom and then crafted the most miraculous political document ever conceived, our Constitution.” ~Jeffery Toobin, “Our Broken Constitution,” *The New Yorker*, December 9, 2013

Statistics or Interesting Facts

Provide attention-grabbing facts that will draw in your audience and show the importance of your essay.

Opening a Historical Essay with a Statistic

Despite the 1.5 million people who died in the Armenian Genocide in 1915, there, unfortunately, is still political and historical debate over whether genocide even occurred.

A Concession

Start your essay by acknowledging an opposing or different argument or approach than you will take in your essay to strengthen your credibility, gain common ground with your reader, and demonstrate the strength of your own position.

Opening a Critique with a Concession

In spite of all of our teachers' and bosses' warnings that it is not a trustworthy source of information, we all rely on Wikipedia. Not only when we cannot remember the name of that guy from that movie, which is a fairly low-risk use, but also when we find a weird rash or are just feeling a little off and we are not sure why. ~Julie Beck, "Doctor's #1 Source for Healthcare Information: Wikipedia," *The Atlantic*, March 5, 2014

A Definition

Avoid simple dictionary definitions and instead provide an expanded definition that shows how the term applies to your essay.

Opening a Scientific Essay with a Definition

Beavers transform ecosystems unlike most species. By building dams and felling trees, they shape their environments. Beavers not only provide ecological benefits, but economic benefits as well. They provide restoration services for free.

An Anecdote or Narrative

Paint a picture or describe a scene. This method is good for personal statements and personal essays as well as for argumentative essays.

Opening a Review Essay with an Anecdote

As the statuesque Cate Blanchett clutched her statuette, she sent an acid air kiss Sandra Bullock's way. The *Blue Jasmine* star told her vanquished best-actress rival, who was gamely smiling after losing for *Gravity*, "Sandra, I could watch that performance to the end of time, and I sort of felt like I had." But then Blanchett turned all feminist, doing a Nobody-puts-Baby-in-a-niche smackdown. She chided industry colleagues "who are still foolishly clinging to the idea that female films with women at the center are niche experiences," adding: "The world is round, people." ~Maureen Dowd, "Frozen in a Niche?" *New York Times*, March 4, 2014

Offer background information.

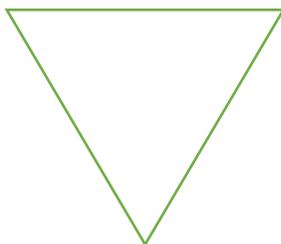
Once you have opened the essay, provide enough background information to introduce your topic and to show how your position or thesis can be important. Share recent news, findings, and statistics or define concepts from which your thesis is developed.

State your thesis.

With a good grasp of your topic, you will have developed a unique perspective on the topic you are arguing. Avoid long summaries of other arguments in your introduction as much as possible; your essay is about your thoughts of the source material. Offer the reader more nuanced ways to see or understand the subject—you should avoid stating an obvious fact. Your thesis should compel readers to rethink or reassess the subject you share with them in the context you have defined. Someone should be able to argue against your thesis.

The Introduction Paragraph Structure

The structure of an introduction paragraph parallels an inverted triangle. You introduce the conversation about the topic broadly and move toward the narrow tip that is your thesis within the conversation.



Open the introduction broadly with a hook to introduce the topic. By providing context and explanation, begin to narrow the topic down to a manageable thesis.

End the introduction with your thesis statement, which may also function as a roadmap of your paper, explaining what you will discuss.

Activity 1: An Analysis of a Model Introduction

Read John Powers' introduction to his essay on the emotional climate in the United States after Barack Obama was elected. Look at how the writer assessed his rhetorical situation, opened his essay, provided background information, and conveyed his intention. Does he state a thesis?

Even the president plays a symbolic, almost mythological role that is hard to talk about, much less quantify—it is like trying to grab a ball of mercury. I am not referring to using the bully pulpit to shape the national agenda but to the way that the president, as America's most inescapably powerful figure, colors the emotional climate of the country. John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan did this affirmatively, expressing ideals that shaped the whole culture. Setting a buoyant tone, they did not just change movies, music, and television; they changed attitudes. Other presidents did the same, only unpleasantly. Richard Nixon created a mood of angry paranoia, Jimmy Carter one of the dreary defeatism, and George W. Bush, especially in that seemingly endless second term, managed to do both at once. ~John Powers, "Dreams from My President," *The American Prospect*, May 8, 2012

1. **Rhetorical situation:** John Powers' essay "Dreams from My President" was published for a liberal political magazine. His audience is knowledgeable about politics, so he avoids stating obvious facts but instead brings up new perspectives that will interest his audience. His purpose is to explore a topic, not to persuade.
2. **Opener:** His essay opener defines the president's role in a way that fits his topic. He does not define the president as the leader of the United States; instead, he states that the influence of the president is intangible, sometimes misunderstood, and worth exploring.
3. **Background:** The introduction provides context to an essay that explores the "emotional climate" of the United States after Barack Obama became president. The author begins by describing the national moods during some former presidents' administrations because in the rest of the essay, he will do the same for Obama and will compare Obama to some of his predecessors.
4. **Thesis:** John Powers' introduction paragraph does not provide an explicit thesis statement; the author chose to describe the emotional climate created by President Obama's predecessors. However, the introduction paragraph does preview what is to come. Try to write your own thesis statement for this introduction.

Activity 2: Brainstorming Introductions

Identify the rhetorical situation and write a hook and thesis statement for the following essay topics. Consider the examples and tips.

1. Does texting affect writing?

A writer writing about the texting essay could open with a sentence that looks like this: *Remember to read this?* Then, the writer could explore the degradation of language due to texting, the art of conversation, and the articulation of ideas.

2. How true to history is the novel *Like Water for Chocolate*?

The essay on the historicity of *Like Water for Chocolate* could be written for an English or history class. How would a different class affect the content and focus of the essay?

3. Legalizing marijuana in the U.S.

Is the purpose of this paper to write about the history of marijuana policy, detail the economic impact of marijuana, or persuade the audience to stand for or against legalizing marijuana? The writer could easily begin the essay with an interesting, unknown-but-relevant fact about marijuana.