

Lesson Plan: Learning about Introductions for Academic Essays

Sarah Prasad

Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

Lesson: Introductions for Academic Essays

Timeframe: approximately 60 minutes

Target Audience: This lesson can be used in almost any class that teaches elements of writing, as introductions are needed in any essay written at the college level. Thus far, I have used it in First- and Second-Year Composition (English 1A and English 1B at SJSU) with success. The lesson does not assume any prior knowledge other than a basic construct of an essay. When an instructor uses this lesson with developmental students, more scaffolding may be needed; likewise, with upper-division students, the instructor may use less scaffolding.

Materials needed: whiteboard, whiteboard pens, computers for the teacher and the students, access to video clips via the Internet (Netflix and youtube.com), access to Canvas (or a similar Learning Management System) via the Internet

Objectives: After the lesson, students will be able to

- analyze an introduction in a visual medium.
- apply what they learn to the written medium.
- write an interesting, engaging introduction for an academic essay.

Background: Students often write introductions that list the main ideas that they plan to address, without much consideration of audience. Introductions are perceived by many as difficult to teach; however, introductions are important. They are a reader's first step into the essay and set the tone for the rest of the essay. For readers, introductions determine what the reading experience will be like. Just like when viewers watch the first few minutes of a show or a film, they quickly make up their mind about how much they will enjoy what will follow. These days, people's shortening attention spans make it increasingly difficult to "hook" them and keep them interested. A study and analysis of effective introductions in film can help students write more effective introductions.

This lesson is also especially effective for visual learners, Generation 1.5 students, and ELL students because of its use of film.

Introduction to Lesson: Schema-Activating Brainstorm [7 minutes]:

- Seat students at tables with 3-4 students each.
- Write the agenda on the board:

TOPIC FOR TODAY: Introductions

1. Look at a few examples in film and analyze them.
2. Find your own examples.
3. Translate the visual medium to academic essay introductions.
4. Start writing your own essay introduction.

- Ask students what they already know about essay introductions (to activate schema); this brief discussion will become a messy brainstorm on the whiteboard.
- Write all ideas on the whiteboard, regardless if they are right or not.
- Keep the brainstorm on the whiteboard until the end of the lesson.

Procedure [50+ minutes]:

Step 1: [15 minutes]

- a. Show the beginning of the show *Damages* through Netflix. (A free trial account is available if you do not have an account already.) (3 minutes)
- b. Instruct students to talk in small groups about what specific aspects of the clip make an effective introduction. (1 minute)
- c. Ask students to report back the specific aspects they discussed. List their ideas on the whiteboard. (3 minutes)
- d. Show the beginning of the film *Limitless*. (3 minutes)
- e. Ask students to talk in small groups about what specific aspects of the clip make an effective introduction, comparing and contrasting it with the *Damages* clip. (2 minutes)
- f. Ask students to report back the specific aspects they discussed. Add these ideas to the list that was created on the whiteboard in Step 1c. (3 minutes)

Step 2: [5 minutes]

- a. Tell the small groups to go to [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com) and search to find examples of introductions that they deem similarly effective. For example, students can search for “movies,” “young Americans documentary series,” “movies free,” or they can search for any specific examples of television shows and/or movies that they come up with. (Optional: Students can access Netflix with free trial accounts.)
- b. Ask each group to prepare a list of effective aspects to report to the class.

Step 3: [10 minutes]

- a. Check in with groups to monitor what they are finding.
- b. Select one or two examples to show the class. The small groups that found the clips should explain what makes them effective.

Step 4: [5 minutes]

- a. Tell the small groups to discuss how to translate what they just learned about introductions to the introduction of an academic essay. Ask “What aspects of the film introductions can we apply to academic essay introductions?”
- b. Have a student from each group write the ideas generated during discussion on the whiteboard.

Step 5: [5 minutes]

- a. Lead a large group discussion to review the ideas on the board.
- b. Make connections and comparisons to the schema-activating brainstorm (the messy brainstorm that we started with).

Step 6: [10+ minutes]

- a. Allow students time to work individually on laptops to start an introduction for the essay they are currently writing for the class.
- b. Tell the students to post what they have on Canvas (or any other Learning Management System) after they have worked for about 10 minutes.

Closure/Evaluation [3 minutes]:

- a. Write on the board: “Homework: Finish writing your introduction on Canvas.”
- b. Ask students what they learned about introductions.

Follow-Up:

- a. Give feedback and guidance on the introductions by posting comments on Canvas.
- b. Further follow-up will be more revision to the introduction for peer review, when they will get even more feedback (continuing the recursive learning process).

Lesson Analysis:

Pedagogy: The lesson is well laid out, accessing the students’ background knowledge and connecting with them through the visual medium of film. It also allows them to analyze other clips and find examples on their own; they then need to be able to explain why their examples are effective. Then they have to translate what they learned to the academic essay. All these steps align with current good teaching practices.

Execution: I am not sure that the examples that I am offering are the best (*Damages* and *Limitless*). Also, I wonder if the lesson is too choppy.