

# Introductions and Conclusions

*The White Rabbit put on his spectacles.  
"Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?" he asked.*

*"Begin at the beginning," the King said very gravely,  
"and go on till you come to the end: then stop."*

■ *Alice in Wonderland*

## Introductions

The introduction of a paper must introduce its thesis and not just its topic. Readers will lose some—if not much—of what the paper says if the introduction does not prepare them for what is coming (and tell them what to look for and how to evaluate it).

For example, an introduction that says, "The British army fought in the battle of Saratoga" gives the reader virtually no guidance about the paper's thesis (i.e., what the paper concludes/argues about the British army at Saratoga).

History papers are not mystery novels. Historians WANT and NEED to give away the ending immediately. Their arguments/conclusions—presented in the introduction—help the reader better follow/understand their ideas, interpretations, and evidence.

In other words, an introduction is a MAP that lays out "the trip the author is going to take [readers] on" and thus "lets readers connect any part of the arguments with the overall structure. Readers with such a map seldom get confused or lost." (Howard Becker)

### Introductions do four things:

- attract the **ATTENTION** of the reader
- convince the reader that he/she **NEEDS TO READ** what the author has to say
- define the paper's **SPECIFIC TOPIC**
- state and explain the paper's **THESIS**

## Writing the introduction:

Consider writing the introduction AFTER finishing your paper. By then, you will know what your paper says. You will have thought it through and provided arguments and supporting evidence; therefore, you will know what the reader needs to know—in brief form—in the introduction. (Always think of your initial introduction as “getting started” and as something that “won’t count.” It is for your eyes only; discard it when you know exactly what your paper says.) A common technique is to turn your conclusion into an introduction. It usually reflects what is in the paper—topic, thesis, arguments, evidence—and can be easily adjusted to be a clear and useful introduction. (TIP: Avoid using future tense in your introduction, e.g., “this paper will explain why.” The paper *does* explain, so use present tense. [See below for avoiding such wording entirely.])

## Some types of introductions:

- Quotation-based
- Historical overview (provides introduction to topic AND background so that fewer explanations are needed later in paper)
- Review of literature or a controversy
- Statistics or startling evidence
- Anecdote or illustration
- Question
- From general to specific OR specific to general

## Avoid:

- “The purpose of this paper is . . .” OR “This paper is [or will be] about . . . .”
- First person (e.g., “I will argue that”)
- Too many questions
- Dictionary definitions (or other “high-school” approaches)

## Length:

There is no rule other than to be logical. Short (e.g., one-page) papers require short introductions (e.g., a short paragraph); longer ones may require a page or more to provide all that a reader needs. **\*\*Longer papers require ELABORATION of the thesis; a sentence is NOT sufficient to prepare the reader for the many pages of arguments and evidence that follow.**

An introduction might well involve a first paragraph that sets up the paper's topic and angle and a second paragraph that provides the paper's thesis (with elaboration).

## Conclusions

Conclusions are the last thing that readers read; they define readers' final impression of a paper. A flat, boring conclusion means a flat, boring (or, at least, disappointing) paper.

Conclusions should be a climax, not an anti-climax. They do not just restate what has already been said; **they interpret, speculate, and provoke thinking.**

## Some types of conclusions:

- Statement of subject's significance
- Call for further research
- Recommendation or speculation
- Comparison of part to present
- Anecdote
- Quotation
- Questions (with or without answers)

## Avoid:

- "In conclusion"; "finally"; "thus" (i.e., clichés)
- Additional or new ideas that introduce (and require) a new paper
- First person
- Simply repeating the paper's thesis (in the same or barely modified language)

## Length:

Again, there is no rule, although too short introductions should definitely be avoided. Short conclusions leave the reader on the edge of a cliff with no directions on how to get down. However, rethink your conclusion if it takes up more than one paragraph.

You are the expert – help your reader pull together and appreciate what he/she has read.

***EXCEPTION:*** Truly short papers (1-2 pages) do not need a separate concluding paragraph. They may be concluded at the end of their last content paragraph with a sentence that ties that paragraph's point to the overall point of the paper.