

Introductions and Conclusions

Introductions and conclusions play a special role in the academic essay, and they frequently demand much of your attention as a writer. A good introduction should identify your topic, provide essential context, and indicate your particular focus in the essay. It also needs to engage your readers' interest. A strong conclusion will provide a sense of closure to the essay while again placing your concepts in a somewhat wider context. It will also, in some instances, add a stimulus to further thought. Since no two essays are the same, no single formula will automatically generate an introduction and conclusion for you. But the following guidelines will help you to construct a suitable beginning and end for your essay.

Some general advice about introductions

1. Some students cannot begin writing the body of the essay until they feel they have the perfect introduction. Be aware of the dangers of sinking too much time into the introduction. Some of that time can be more usefully channeled into planning and writing.
2. You may be the kind of writer who writes an introduction first in order to explore your own thinking on the topic. If so, remember that you may at a later stage need to compress your introduction.
3. It can be fine to leave the writing of the introduction for a later stage in the essay-writing process. Some people write their introduction only after they have completed the rest of the essay. Others write the introduction first but rewrite it significantly in light of what they end up saying in the body of their paper.
4. The introductions for most papers can be effectively written in one paragraph occupying half to three-quarters of the first page. Your introduction may be longer than that, and it may take more than one paragraph, but be sure you know why. The size of your introduction should bear some relationship to the length and complexity of your paper. A twenty page paper may call for a two-page introduction, but a five-page paper will not.
5. Get to the point as soon as possible. Generally, you want to raise your topic in your very first sentences. A common error is to begin too broadly or too far off topic. Avoid sweeping generalizations.
6. If your essay has a thesis, your thesis statement will typically appear at the end of your introduction, even though that is not a hard-and-fast rule. You may, for example, follow your thesis with a brief road map to your essay that sketches the basic structure of your argument. The longer the paper, the more useful a road map becomes.

How do I write an interesting, effective introduction?

Consider these strategies for capturing your readers' attention and for fleshing out your introduction:

1. Find a startling statistic that illustrates the seriousness of the problem you will address.
2. Quote an expert (but be sure to introduce him or her first).
3. Mention a common misperception that your thesis will argue *against*.
4. Give some background information necessary for understanding the essay.
5. Use a brief narrative or anecdote that exemplifies your reason for choosing the topic. In an assignment that encourages personal reflection, you may draw on your own experiences; in a research essay, the narrative may illustrate a common real-world scenario.
6. In a science paper, explain key scientific concepts and refer to relevant literature. Lead up to your own contribution or intervention.
7. In a more technical paper, define a term that is possibly unfamiliar to your audience but is central to understanding the essay.

In fleshing out your introduction, you will want to avoid some common pitfalls:

1. Don't provide dictionary definitions, especially of words your audience already knows.
2. Don't repeat the assignment specifications using the professor's wording.
3. Don't give details and in-depth explanations that really belong in your body paragraphs. You can usually postpone background material to the body of the essay.

Some general advice about conclusions

1. A conclusion is not merely a summary of your points or a re-statement of your thesis. If you wish to summarize—and often you must—do so in fresh language. Remind the reader of how the evidence you've presented has contributed to your thesis.
2. The conclusion, like much of the rest of the paper, involves critical thinking. Reflect upon the significance of what you've written. Try to convey some closing thoughts about the larger implications of your argument.
3. Broaden your focus a bit at the end of the essay. A good last sentence leaves your reader with something to think about, a concept in some way illuminated by what you've written in the paper.
4. For most essays, one well-developed paragraph is sufficient for a conclusion. In some cases, a two-or-three paragraph conclusion may be appropriate. As with introductions, the length of the conclusion should reflect the length of the essay.

How do I write an interesting, effective conclusion?

The following strategies may help you move beyond merely summarizing the key points of your essay:

1. If your essay deals with a contemporary problem, warn readers of the possible consequences of not attending to the problem.
2. Recommend a specific course of action.
3. Use an apt quotation or expert opinion to lend authority to the conclusion you have reached.
4. Give a startling statistic, fact, or visual image to drive home the ultimate point of your paper.
5. If your discipline encourages personal reflection, illustrate your concluding point with a relevant narrative drawn from your own life experiences.
6. Return to an anecdote, example, or quotation that you introduced in your introduction, but add further insight that derives from the body of your essay.
7. In a science or social science paper, mention worthwhile avenues for future research on your topic.

How does genre affect my introduction or conclusion?

Most of the advice in this handout pertains to argumentative or exploratory academic essays. Be aware, however, that different genres have their own special expectations about beginnings and endings. Some academic genres may not even require an introduction or conclusion. An annotated bibliography, for example, typically provides neither. A book review may begin with a summary of the book and conclude with an overall assessment of it. A policy briefing usually includes an introduction but may conclude with a series of recommendations. Check your assignment carefully for any directions about what to include in your introduction or conclusion.