

## WRITING WORKSHOP BRIEF GUIDE SERIES

# A Brief Guide to Writing Introductions

## On Writing Introductions

The aim of this guide is to help students in writing introductions, whether they are struggling or just hoping to improve. For the majority of my career as a student, I approached introductions with a desire to get them over with. They made me anxious. It wasn't until college that I began to view the introduction as anything more than tedious. There are many reasons that people find writing introductions challenging, including a lack of enthusiasm or confidence about the topic at hand, worries about the thesis (e.g., whether or not it is clear, specific, and convincing, etc.), uncertainty about what information to include, and a perceived need to be dramatic and bold. Much like advertisements on television, introductions serve to get the attention of their audience members (i.e., their readers) and sell their product (i.e., their argument). In order to do so, they must not only carry an effective argument, but also keep the reader interested. Though the product itself may not be particularly exciting, a successful advertisement will not make this obvious. At the same time, however, it should honestly market those aspects of the product that make it desirable. It is no wonder, then, that introductions produce fear in the hearts of those who must write them—they must achieve so much in so little space. My guide aims to help combat and ultimately eliminate some of these fears.

## “Well, why do introductions matter?”

### 1) **The importance of first impressions:**

Introductions are a way of getting your reader familiar with the topic you have chosen, and, more specifically, with the argument. Though it is optimistic to assume that readers will give you the benefit of the doubt and remain patient as they do their best to follow along, it isn't very likely. In writing your introduction, you should be aware of the stubbornness and lasting impact of first impressions. To begin strongly is to win over your reader. Keep them engaged as they continue beyond the thesis!

2) **Intros as GPS systems:** Introductions function to provide relevant information. This information will then work to guide the reader as they navigate the rest of your paper. This is why clarity and specificity are so important. Not only should the introduction convey a strong argument, but it should also map out the geography of the supporting paragraphs. This will supply your reader with the expectations necessary to understand what is going on, and read with ease. There should be no major surprises.

3) **Tools of enticement:** In addition to what was said before, introductions should also serve to make the reader more interested in the argument. Though not lengthy, the few sentences that they are made up of should be enough to spark and sustain the reader's investment in the topic.



## “What are some of the of the strategies I can use in my own writing?”

**1) Consider the question (or questions) you are trying to answer:** Though you may not be given a prompt with specific questions, you can always create questions that help to inspire you with an idea for your thesis—often, this happens naturally with the right question or set of questions. These questions will appear in some form in the broader sentences that lead up to your thesis, whose purpose is to answer them.

**2) Imagine the structure of your funnel:**

Though I'm sure you have heard this many times from English teachers, starting broad and slowly becoming narrower is a successful route to go down. As a general rule of thumb, it is advisable to strive for a structure of less specific to more specific. This structure is like that of a funnel because it begins broad and gradually narrows to a defined point. This “point” is your thesis, which is sharper and more direct than the sentences before it. The effectiveness of this method, however, depends on your argument’s “scope,” meaning how much you want to cover. In other words, there is such a thing as being too broad. If the initial broadness is out of proportion with the questions leading up to the thesis, this will only confuse your reader. Imagine wearing glasses of the wrong prescription, or looking into a microscope that isn’t properly adjusted for the specimen you are looking at...

**3) When at a dead end, save the first for last:**

As creatures that like predictability, we get in the habit of completing tasks in an orderly and structured way. Not following this order is thought to be improper and causes discomfort. Many writers fear the consequences of writing an introduction after having written their body paragraphs. Truthfully, however, there is nothing wrong with doing this. In fact, it is often your best bet if you are uncertain about the nature, specificity, and supportability of your thesis. In these situations, the writing process will often lead to greater clarity and more certainty about what it is that you want to argue.

**4) Recognize your work as dynamic, living thing:**

Frequently, writers discover that their argument has changed as they have begun to write. Sometimes, it isn't until the end of the essay that they realize this. It can be quite scary at first; their ideas mature and transform as they write, often taking them in directions that they had never planned on going. In these cases, it is more than okay to go back and adjust your argument so that it fits with the body paragraphs you have written.

**5) Begin with a hook:** Except for the conclusion, the introduction allows for the most freedom of expression and creativity. The first few lines are the most important—these are what steal—or fail to steal—your reader’s attention. There are a variety of possibilities for hooks, which include, but aren’t limited to, the following:

- \*Offer a concise, relevant example or provocative question for your reader to consider
- \*Start off with a striking quotation or line of dialogue—one that makes it easier to think critically about the subject matter in question
- \*Provide a powerful and relevant story (e.g., from your own life or the lives of others)
- \*Begin with a short but colorful depiction of an image or scene

**6) Assess the purpose/value of each sentence, as well as the relationships among them:**

Ask yourself, “can this paragraph still make sense and remain strong without this sentence?” “If I were to remove it, would the sentences that come before and after it become confusing?” “Would the strength of the argument be weakened?” If the answer to any of these questions is “no,” then it is best to choose less over more.

**7) Show assertiveness and conviction**

Although you may not be fully convinced in the argument you have chosen, there is no reason that your reader has to know this. Any ambivalence regarding the thesis on the part of the writer will immediately be felt by the careful reader, which will decrease your chances that they will believe it.

**1) It contains fillers or space holders**

These are the kinds of introductions whose sentences are simply there to take up space—they are written without excitement or passion about the subject and often come across as vague and indecisive. They contain many words, but say little. Although the writer might not think their attitude toward their introduction obvious, most teachers are immediately able to discern it. Example: “The years following World War II marked an important and major transition in Western history. Many countries were affected by the aftermath in a variety of ways, and forced to consider new strategies for dealing with international affairs...” Though well-written, this example provides us with a bunch of fuzzy words. Why were these years “important” and what was so “major” about the transition? Was the entire West affected? Why does “West” matter? Which countries were affected, and what are these “ways?” In what sense were they forced? All in all, it sounds pretty, but doesn’t give your reader anything valuable to take away from it.

**2) It simply reiterates the prompt**

Though paraphrasing a prompt may seem tempting when attacked by writer’s block, it is generally not advisable. This is because simple reiteration provides nothing new, original, or interesting. Especially when your professor has millions of papers to read addressing the same prompt, this strategy will do little to capture their attention...

**3) It presents and defines a word or term**

It may begin something like this: “According to Webster’s dictionary, “empathy” denotes “the ability to share and understand someone else’s emotions...”

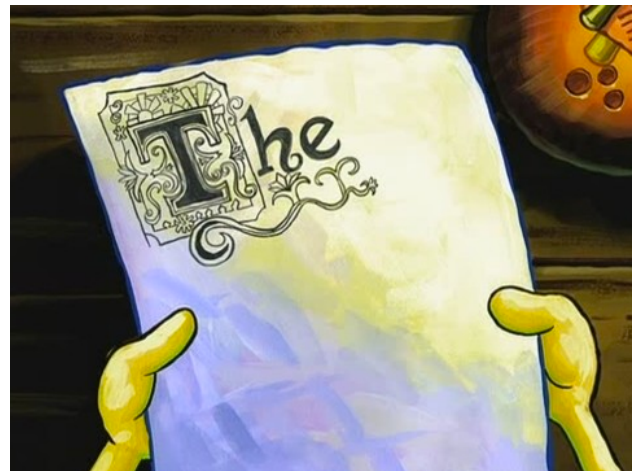
Exception: If the term of interest has multiple meanings, some of which are subtler or less common, a definition may prove enlightening and useful. In this case, it can succeed in inspiring within the reader a more complex understanding of some concept, phenomenon, etc.

**4) It makes nonspecific, overly dramatic claims**

Consider revising if it offers blanket generalizations, or sweeping assertions that span much of human history: “Since the beginning of civilization, social hierarchies have existed to maintain order...”

**5) It resembles a book report:**

If it provides not much more than a summary of events and facts, then it may very well fall under this description: “Mary Shelley, an English novelist, is perhaps most famous for her work, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. Published anonymously in 1818, it is a story that chronicles the life and adventures of a young scientist named Victor Frankenstein, whose quest for creation and desire for knowledge ultimately leads to destruction and death...”

**Questions to Consider Before you write:**

- What is your topic?
- Who or what are you writing about? Is it an author, a text, a historical event?
- What is your mission in writing this?
- What’s the issue? What paradox, concern, debate, fallacy, ambiguity, argument, etc., are you addressing? What do you hope to resolve/shed light on?
- What is your position? What have you chosen to argue, and why have you chosen it?
- What makes your thesis valid? Can it be adequately supported with the materials accessible to you?
- “Well, okay, but so what?” Anticipate this reaction from your audience. Consider the reader’s curiosity as to why it all matters or makes a difference.

## Sample Introductions: The Weak Versus the Strong

### **Sample #1: Weak**

I should have never married a Muslim,” she says. “He died because of you. He died because of your name.” This is the climax of the film “My Name is Khan,” functioning as both an explanation of Khan’s isolation and a focal point for audience’s emotions. The scene is set at the site of Sameer’s death, emphasizing the weight of Mandira’s words. Traumatized by Sam’s death and disillusioned by the police’s failures to investigate, she self-internalizes the blame and then turns it on to Khan. She repeatedly tells him to leave her. The scene is nuanced, clearly demonstrating that her actions and words are a result of the trauma that she has experienced, but the director also alludes that she blames Khan’s religion for the problems in her life and that she wishes to dissociate herself from him because he is a Muslim. Although Mandira is not Muslim, this scene is indicative of many Muslim’s attitudes towards the Muslim community—a self-imposed separation in order to dissociate from the negative perception of Muslims in America.

### **Sample #2: Weak**

In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s classic work, *The Great Gatsby*, there are many fundamental themes, including the unrealized American dream, post-World War I moral decadence, unwavering hope, idealism, and the malleability of identity. Another somewhat more subtle motif employed throughout the story is the role of isolation, and the inherent aversion that inextricably goes hand in hand with it. Although the way in which this is dealt with differentiates from character to character, each individual seems to grapple with the plight of isolation at some point during the novel. The recurring idea of isolation and loneliness plays an integral part in driving the plot as well as dictating the actions and idiosyncratic behaviors of the characters. It is of the utmost importance when analyzing *The Great Gatsby* to understand that the theme of isolation in the story is not nearly the same as being alone in the literal sense.

### **Sample #3: Weak**

The motif of invisibility and people’s failure to see clearly, if at all, is deeply entrenched within the novel, *Invisible Man*. Invisible, the narrator and protagonist of the story constantly wishes to be seen, acknowledged, and regarded as an individual by a mostly white-dominated, racially segregated society; However, as the book progresses, he gradually comes to the realization that there are benefits to living “out of sight”. One of the fundamental recurring themes in *Invisible Man* is invisibility. Although the idea of being “invisible” conventionally has negative connotations, many instances throughout Ellison’s novel indicate that invisibility and the blindness of others can be used to one’s advantage. Although *Invisible Man* may at first appear to be a sociopolitical novel about the oppressiveness that goes along with invisibility, there are several pivotal moments in the story that prove to the contrary.

### **What Doesn’t Work (Sample #1):**

Though strong in some ways, this paragraph is generally weak. Often, quotations can add flavor and texture to an introduction. In this case, however, the quotation appears suddenly—almost out of the blue. This only distracts the reader, who must continue reading without understanding the meaning of the words. While a lengthy summary is never the way to go, it is usually smart to provide a quick overview of what is to be discussed. It seems that the essential meat of the paragraph exists within the last two sentences. This sample reads more like a thesis attached to a bundle of unnecessary words than an introduction.

### **What Doesn’t Work (Sample #2):**

The first issue with this introduction is the way it begins: with a laundry list of “themes” that have nothing to do with the argument. The writer then talks about the theme of isolation, but does not explain why it is “subtle.” What makes it subtle, and why is it worth mentioning? “Although the way in which this is dealt with differentiates from character to character” is also something that needs more explanation. Firstly, who deals with this theme, the characters or the author? Secondly, how does isolation differ from character to character? In the sentence that follows, which happens to be the thesis, there is also very little clarity. How does this motif drive the plot or motivate action? Lastly, the paragraph concludes with a sentence that seems excessive and awkward—it presents an idea that is similar to the thesis, but not the same. This just confuses the reader, who now wonders what the paper will be about.

### **What Doesn’t Work (Sample #3):**

Although the paragraph begins with a sentence that relates to the thesis, it uses too many words. Ask yourself—does “deeply entrenched” provide useful information, or does it simply take up space? Despite the fact that it is difficult and sometimes painful to be honest with yourself, it will result in better and more straightforward writing. The second sentence encounters similar problems of vagueness and wordiness. Don’t “seen,” “acknowledged,” and “regarded” have similar meanings? Is each of these words necessary to make a point? This vagueness continues for the entire introduction. Several sentences say the same thing, in slightly different ways. Lastly, the thesis could be strengthened by replacing “to the contrary” with a short description of *how* Invisible’s metaphorical invisibility benefits him.

**Sample #4: Strong**

*Paradise Lost* traces the progression of events as articulated in the first book of the Bible: Satan's insurrection against God and expulsion from heaven, God's creation of Adam and Eve, and man's fall from grace. More than a reanimation of the events of Genesis, Milton's 17<sup>th</sup> century epic imbues the story of man's introduction to sin with a humanity and psychological complexity not present in the Old Testament. The poem, because of its richness of characterization and tendency toward equivocality, lends itself to a variety of interpretations. One point of contention among scholars concerns itself with the transgression of Adam in the Garden of Eden. Some maintain the assertion that Adam's consumption of the Forbidden Fruit is an act of passion grounded in weakness and sexual desire, which renders him incapable of reason or moral contemplation. C.S. Lewis, in his essay "The Fall" writes that "Adam fell by uxoriousness," by a submissive fondness toward or slavish idolization of Eve. A great many passages within the text, however, undermine this reading of Adam. Throughout *Paradise Lost*, instances abound that implicate love as the impetus behind Adam's offense against God. It is love, not lust, which compels Adam to transgress and act in opposition to the divine command.

**Sample #5: Strong**

In *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens traces the psychological and moral development of its young protagonist, Pip. An acute social consciousness pervades the novel, and along with it, the social emotions of guilt and shame. Social emotions require the representation of the mental states of other people, and for this reason, they are born of socialization and exposure to others. Pip embodies guilt and the harmful consequences it can exact on an individual's well being: "Pip has certainly one of the guiltiest consciences in literature," writes literary critic Julian Moynahan (654). His guilty conscience encumbers and consumes him, governing his interactions and relationships with others, and polluting his every waking thought. Psychoanalyst Helen B. Lewis argues that there is a fine distinction between the emotions of guilt and shame: "The experience of shame is directly about the self, which is the focus of evaluation. In guilt, the self is not the central object of negative evaluation, but rather the thing done is the focus." While guilt focuses on the wrongness of one's actions and endeavors to make things right, shame focuses on the wrongness of oneself or someone else. Guilt causes its victims to focus outwardly on those whom they have wronged, whereas shame causes its victim to focus inwardly and selfishly on themselves rather than on others. Throughout the course of his transition from childhood to adulthood, Pip undergoes three important emotional stages. The first is unwarranted or irrational guilt, caused by his unfair upbringing and coincidental associations with criminality. The second stage is shame, which is caused by his introduction into the world of wealth and the arrival of his great expectations. The final and most formative stage is, once again, guilt. This guilt, however, is warranted and rational, and leads to redemption and moral development.

**What works (Sample #4):**

The writer here chose to present an unpopular argument about Adam's "sin" in the Garden of Eden, arguing that it wasn't sinful. This paragraph succeeds for several reasons: First, it begins by providing a short and yet informative overview. It follows the "funnel structure" of beginning broad and gradually becoming more specific. The thesis functions as a logical conclusion based on the sentences before it, and it contains a clear, powerful argument. It recognizes the many points of view that exist about Adam's action. Awareness of different perspectives is important because it shows the reader that they have thought a lot about the topic, and that they aren't blind to other ways of thinking. Basically, they have done their research before drawing a conclusion of their own. The introduction then mentions a common interpretation held by critics. After presenting this argument, the writer presents his or her own interpretation, in a way that is crystal clear and direct. There is no vagueness here, nor any sign of doubt.

**What works (Sample #5):**

This introduction, though a bit long, is strong for several reasons. It begins with a short, relevant statement about the novel and the main character's development. It then goes on to describe two emotions that the thesis will address later in the paragraph. These emotions are then discussed in greater depth, and a quotation is used to improve understanding. Then, importantly, the writer explains the differences between guilt and shame, and presents another quotation to help make these differences more clear. The final sentences zoom in, returning to the protagonist. Finally, we reach the thesis, which argues for a division of Pip's emotional development into three stages, each of which relate to the two emotions that are described.

## **Wait! Don't forget to...**

- \*Think critically about the topic of your paper
- \*Consider your goal as a writer—what are you trying to achieve? (e.g., to explain a phenomenon, persuade your audience, argue against a common interpretation? Etc.)
- \*Eliminate unnecessary words or sentences that don't say much
- \*Avoid clichéd words, phrases, and overused quotations
- \*Don't worry about perfection...be spontaneous! You can always make changes later on, once you have something written down.
- \*Find your authentic voice and stick with it—You can remain formal without having to be scholarly or unnatural. Being true to yourself is key.