

On Introductions: Getting Started With Getting Started

What is the purpose of an introduction?

The purpose of the introduction is to **introduce and define the topic** of your paper for your reader. Think of your introduction as a **map** that will orient your reader and lead into your **thesis**. Your introduction should be aimed at an audience of your academic peers who have already read the text in question and believe it has some import, but don't yet know quite what that might be (or don't know what *your* take on that import might be).

What are the key components of an introduction?

- The **title** and **author** of the work(s) your paper will discuss. Be sure to keep your focus on the text, rather than on the author, their life, or their possible intentions.
- An **incisive observation** about the text that helps to set up the larger claim in your thesis. Instead of generalizing or posturing, **jump directly into your discussion of the text**, perhaps even with a specific example that shows what you'll be looking at in the paper.
- A **short description** (*not* a lengthy plot summary) of the specific part or aspect of the text that is relevant to your argument. You could also think of this as connecting to general **overview of your topic with contextual details** you may wish to discuss later in your paper. For example, if you will be discussing a single major character or the relationship between characters, introduce who they are and what role they play in the work as a whole.
- An introduction to the **problem** your paper is trying to solve. How you do this will depend on what the project of your paper is: you might describe a formal aspect of the text to which you want to draw your reader's attention, define a term that the text is using in an unconventional and interesting way that's crucial to your argument, etc.
- The actual **language** of the text. This means you can actually include short quotes, phrases, and words from the text. Regardless, your paper should be grounded in the language and terms of the text from the beginning. If your argument is that the text itself is arguing against something (say, patriarchy, or racism), or is addressing a specific audience, set up what those are **per the terms of the text**. For bigger **concepts** in the text that are crucial to your argument (e.g. "feminism," "identity"), define them deliberately and specifically

rather than assuming shared knowledge or waiting until later on in the paper.

- **A condensed and convincing version of your argument: your thesis.** As we've discussed, a **thesis** is not necessarily just a thesis *sentence*. Keep in mind the three-story house model and the subordinating style. In the process, be sure to differentiate between observations and claims, or what's readily apparent in the text versus what you're arguing about it.

Tips for getting started

Some writers find they can write better introductions *after* having written the body of the paper, once they've discovered what it is they are actually arguing. Try **working from a rough draft of a thesis** that you know you'll significantly revise as you go along and write the body of the paper first; you can then **refine your introduction and thesis throughout the writing process**. Then, once you've finished the paper, **go back to your introduction and thesis** to make sure that they reflect any changes you've made or insights you've had along the way. Your ideas and orientation toward your topic will be clearer to you at that point.

Introduction Checklist (*The answer to each question should be "yes."*)

1. Does the introduction move right into its **discussion of its primary text**? Does it effectively introduce the reader to the **specific aspect of the text** it is interested in or the **problem** it is trying to solve?
2. Is every part of the introduction **necessary**? Is the introduction free of generalizations and clichés? Is it free of unrelated plot details? Is it free of value judgments?
3. Does the introduction contain a coherent and convincing account of the paper's **argument**? Is it clear from the first paragraph what the paper's critical project is and how it intends to go about proving its claim? Is the **scope** of the argument appropriate for a paper of the required length?
4. Is the introduction grounded in the **language** of the text itself? Are the argument's **key terms** adequately explained?
5. Is the introduction **free of grammatical errors**? Is it free of instances of awkward syntax, of sentences that you had to read multiple times before grasping their meaning?

tl;dr:

*What does your reader need to know **before** they start reading the rest of your paper?*

Read each introduction example with a critical eye using the checklist. What has each one done well? What could be revised? Note down the strengths and weaknesses of each one.

Example 1:

Betrayed by his own brother, Prospero, the Duke of Milan, was stripped of his dukedom and left to face the wrath of the raging sea. Eventually reaching an island, Prospero is limited, for twelve years, to the company of his daughter, Miranda, and a slave native to the isle. Being confined in isolation for this extent of time results in a specific manner of living. The hierarchy that arose is often perceived by readers as patriarchal, for Prospero blatantly exercises authority over his daughter — which can be mistaken as an exhibition of oppression; however, under the circumstances, the distribution of power was not affected by gender, rather it was based on practicality. Although the perceived male dominance portrayed through Prospero's relationships in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* incites a patriarchy, it cannot be ignored that Prospero aspires to provide his daughter with a fulfilling life. Therefore, his actions actually derive from his paternal instincts. Furthermore, the presence of a female authority figure in existence prior to Prospero, destabilizes the assertion that gender impacts who possesses authority.

Example 2:

In *The Trial* by Franz Kafka, protagonist Joseph K. is arrested, investigated, and executed for an unknown crime by a mysterious and secretive court of law. Resolved to contest his conviction by an inaccessible system of law, K. fights to defend himself, enlisting the help of painters, clerks and lawyers. In the process, K. pursues and is pursued by many women, each of whom has some connection to the legal system. While K.'s crime remains unknown, intertwined themes of guilt and attraction in *The*

Trial suggest that K.'s sexuality is in fact the "crime" for which he is executed. Contradictorily, however, the court, which judges K. for his sexual nature, is in itself inherently sexual, as are its methods of law enforcement and its dealings with its underlings. The contradiction between the court's sexual foundations and its conviction of K.'s sexuality seems irreconcilable, and a close reading of the novel reveals a deep-rooted, pervasive hypocrisy regarding sexuality in *The Trial's* legal system.

What are some common pitfalls in introductions?

- The huge **generalization** or reference to “real life,” “humankind,” “everyone,” or “all people.”
 - **Example:** “Ever since the dawn of time, people have been blinded by love...” or “All over the world, people associate sense with logic...”
 - *Why is this so tempting?* It seems to give the paper an air of significance and authority by connecting it to such a monumental or “real” topic. It’s also a common side effect of the “funnel” technique of writing an introduction.
 - *Why avoid it?* It’s so general and vague that it really has nothing to do with your textually-specific, analytical, argumentative thesis. It’s also impossible to prove such broad assertions.
- The book-jacket **blurb/summary**.
 - **Example:** “*Sense and Sensibility*, a brilliant novel by Jane Austin, skillfully portrays two types of people: those with sense and those with sensibility.”
 - *Why is this tempting?* It adopts a familiar model of responding to a book and feels like a solid, uncontroversial opening.
 - *Why avoid it?* It gives the paper an elementary feeling, and puts forth no argument about the text. In terms of genre, the job of an analytical essay is not to summarize the plot, like a book report, or to flatter the author, like a blurb on a book.
- Dramatic or flashy **descriptions** or **common expressions**.
 - **Example:** “Alice stumbles headlong down the rabbit hole, and thus was a new expression born into the English language.” Or “The playwright William Shakespeare once said, ‘If music be the food of love, play on.’ This statement is confirmed by the many writers who have shown how people fall in love with love itself.”
 - *Why is this tempting?* It feels catchy and promises to “hook” the reader. It makes you feel like you’re saying something significant about your topic.
 - *Why avoid it?* It’s often trite or clichéd and has little relation to your actual argument. It runs the risk of detracting from the analysis you’ll be doing.