

Ideas for Developing an Introduction

Introductions are very important. Like the opening rounds of the chess game, they help to lay a foundation for what will be later accomplished.

Some things to avoid:

- **Don't waste the introduction.** Spend some real time thinking about what kind of useful information you could provide.
- **Don't try to go through quickly what you will accomplish later.** Your intro should not be a preview of the paper; instead, it should be *preparation*.

What should you do, then? In writing a good intro, here are some useful questions you might want to consider (and you may want to tackle more than one):

- ***Is there a single book or work you are dealing primarily with?*** Perhaps you could introduce it in a general way. Try to stay away from what you will be discussing in the paper, though. Perhaps you could talk about some other important aspects of the work that aren't immediately relevant to the paper, or perhaps provide some information that will be useful for the analysis later on.
- ***Is there a basic theme you are addressing?*** Maybe it could be discussed in a general way. Be careful here—stay away from grand statements! Never use a phrase such as “throughout history,” “throughout time,” etc. But, for example, if you were asked to think about the purpose of the military organization used in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards*, you could possibly talk in general about the role of the military in our own society—in other words, the function it plays in our government, society, and individual lives.
- ***Are there any basic ideas you are working with?*** If so, you should consider developing some sort of working definition. Stay away from quoting dictionaries, though—or any sentences that sound like you might be quoting a dictionary.
- ***Is there a specific question you are dealing with?*** If you can outline a debate about the question quickly, perhaps this can be done in the introduction. Be careful, though, to pay attention to the length of your intro. If you don't feel like you can fit the debate into the intro—either the debate is too complicated, or your intro space is too short to cover a debate—than save it for the body of the essay.
- ***Is there a particular point of view you are going to be arguing against?*** Perhaps that point of view could be developed in the introduction.

- ***Is there any historical background that might be useful for understanding the importance of the question?*** If so, perhaps you can outline that in the introduction. Again, keep it limited to immediate historical background—big generalizations such as “wars have always been a big part of history” is a very weak way to begin a paper.
- ***Is there information that you could cover quickly that might provide some balance to the main thrust of the paper?*** For example, if you are writing a paper that contrasts two works, you might want to start by pointing out the similarities. Or, vice versa, you could outline some contrast if the rest of your paper will focus on the similarities between the works.
- ***Is there anything that you can tell the reader that might make the reader interested in or excited about the question/problem?*** In other words, how would you convince the reader to care at all about the paper you are writing? For short papers, you may not have time to do this, but for even a 10-12 page paper, you will probably have enough space for this

Always consider length. For a 5-6 page paper, you should aim for an introduction the length of $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ of a page (and certainly no longer than a page). Shorter than this will fail to engage the reader in the problem, but longer than this will take up valuable space that you will need to carry out your argument. For a 10-12 page, you easily have a page and possibly a little more. For a 25-page paper, 2-3 pages for an introduction would not be too much. Thus, for a longer paper, you can probably get more done in your introduction. For a really long paper, you could quite possibly accomplish two or three of the above items before moving on to the body.