

Writing Introductions

The introduction of a paper is often the hardest to write—You stare at your computer screen trying to come up with the perfect wording of that first sentence. Oftentimes, the end result of this process is either extended paralysis or a sweeping generalization that is more distracting than helpful to the reader. Following are some guidelines to writing introductions and pitfalls to avoid.

Format of an introduction

Think of an introduction as instrumental; you want the reader to look at the first paragraph and sense the importance of your topic and your argument.

1. **Attention-getter/Justification** – The first sentence should explain to the reader, in general, why they should want to read your paper. It should be specific to your topic, and should communicate why you were interested in the topic. Chances are, if you find something interesting or puzzling, your reader will as well. You can also think of the first sentence as a justification of your topic – why is your topic important/significant/in need of additional analysis and/or reflection. Remember to be as specific as possible – you don't want to get your reader excited about reading a paper on the paradoxes of American democracy if you are really going to be comparing and contrasting different polling techniques.
2. **Thesis Statement** – There is no suspense in social science writing. Be clear as to what argument you will be presenting in the paper. Your thesis should include both a claim and a warrant, ie the argument you are making and the reason supporting it. For example, you might argue that China poses a threat to American national security, but you also need to articulate why, i.e. because its economic growth is pushing American enterprises out of Asia. Depending on your professor/TA preferences, you generally can use “I” in your thesis statement – don't be afraid to own your thesis – it is your argument and should be stated as specifically and strongly as possible.
3. **Preview/Roadmap** – It is also important to let the reader in on how you will organize your argument. This does two things: 1) it forces you to organize your thoughts so that you can present them in a coherent manner. If you just throw a bunch of ideas at the reader, he/she may not understand them the same way that you intended them to. 2) This gives the reader a criteria for evaluating your argument; you've said that you'll prove your argument if you do these things.

He/she may disagree with you on your selection of issues, but he/she cannot disagree that you didn't do what you said you would do. This also helps the reader if your writing gets a bit muddled in the middle of the paper – they know the objectives you set at the outset, so he/she can link your ideas up with these objectives more easily.

Potential pitfalls:

1. **Avoid sweeping statements** – Some TAs refer to these as “Miss America” statements, i.e. general observations about the world. Try to make your introduction as specific as possible to your argument.
2. **Keep it specific** – If your first sentence talks generally about democracy or international peace, the reader will expect that that is the topic you will be discussing. Not only will you confuse the reader about the topic, but you set overly high expectations for the ground the paper will cover. If you are planning to discuss military doctrine or public opinion polling, explain why that specific issue is relevant/interesting.
3. **Minimize quotations** – The introduction of your paper should feature your voice presenting your argument. Try to avoid using quotations, unless it is relevant to your paper (i.e. you are comparing two specific texts). Utilize quotations only instrumentally to help you explain/demonstrate your argument.