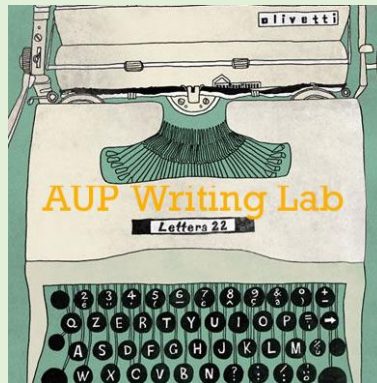


INTRODUCTIONS



“Nothing so difficult as beginnings . . . unless perhaps the end.” Lord George Gordon Byron.

Lord Byron’s line in “Don Juan” could actually be addressing the writing of introductions and conclusions. Although each is difficult to craft, both are crucial parts of any essay or longer paper. They are worth investing time in as they significantly influence your reader’s engagement with and understanding of your paper.

Your intro is your only chance to make a first impression and provide your professors with their initial impressions of your argument, your writing style, and the overall quality of your work.

When to Write the Introduction: Experienced writers construct introductions when they’re starting a paper, or in the process of writing their papers as they gain a clearer sense of their writing goals, or as the last piece of writing they do. You should discover when it works best for you and try different approaches. However, you should always be sure to check your introduction after you have produced the late draft of any paper to confirm that your introduction introduces the paper you actually wrote (see Reverse Outlines).

Five Points to Writing Effective Introductions: Although introductions are different across the disciplines, effective introductions typically attend to these writing issues.

1. Announce the Topic of Your Paper. One of the important functions of an introduction is to announce what you are writing about to your readers. So as you review and revise your introduction be sure your reader will be able to say fairly clearly what your paper is about.

2. Signal What is New or Different in Your Paper. In more advanced research writing, professors will expect you to show what is new about your position, or what need or gap your paper is addressing. Signal what’s new or different about your research question or approach so readers will see where your work fits into the larger picture.

3. Define Your Terms and Key Words in Your Paper. There is one fundamental issue experienced writers regularly address in papers: they define their terms. For example, if you are writing a film studies paper about problems of love in relationships in French cinema, you will need to define the terms love. People know that there are many kinds of love in the world, for example the love between parents or partners or love between friends which is different from love between siblings. In your film studies paper, you will help your readers if you define the love about which you are writing. In this case, it may turn out to

be a very special kind of “love-hate existential-love” that French bad guys exude and which tends to attract the wrong kind of significant other. If the way you introduce your treatment of a subject sounds like it could introduce another example of the same subject (like another French cinema paper about love relationships), then you should revise to express specifically how you will approach this subject in your paper, perhaps even explaining how your approach distinguishes itself from other papers treating the same subject.

4. Build Up to a Thesis, Question, or Purpose Statement You will often read them toward the end of an introduction: the thesis statement (which could also be a purpose statement or question). A thesis statement is the expression of your paper topic as an argument, and you may compose a thesis in one or several sentences. If writers carefully define their terms and key words, and if they provide sufficient steps to help readers understand the how the writer is approaching a topic, then by the end of the introduction, when the thesis appears, readers will receive the thesis as the next logical step in your introduction.

5. Orient a Reader to Your Paper. Effective introductions account for the reader’s position. Your readers are trying to understand a complex text that is new to them: your paper. They want to know what it’s about, to care about the background information, and to understand your goals or purpose. They need to know what you’re going to analyze, and they want to understand your argument. For them to understand the richness and complexity of your work, they need an explicit and detailed overview: this introduction-as-overview has an effect on the reader and will help you as the writer to set up the reader’s expectations for your paper.

Questions of Length and Order. How long should the beginning be? The length should be proportionate to the length and complexity of the whole essay. For instance, if you're writing a five-page essay analyzing a single text, your beginning should be brief, no more than one or two paragraphs. On the other hand, it may take several paragraphs to set up a ten-page essay.

Does the business of the beginning have to be addressed in a particular order? No, but the order should be logical. Usually, for instance, the question or thesis statement that focuses the essay comes at the end of the beginning, where it serves as the jumping-off point for the middle, or main body, of the essay. The middle sentences in your introduction should announce the direction your argument will take and your first sentence? Here are a few ideas:

Avoid the following types of openings:

- **The history-of-the-world (or long-distance) opening**, which aims to establish a context for the essay by getting a long running start: "Ever since the dawn of civilized life, societies have struggled to reconcile the need for change with the need for order." What are we talking about here, political revolution or a new brand of soft drink? Get to it.
- **The funnel opening (a variation on the same theme)**, which starts with something broad and general and "funnels" its way down to a specific topic. If your essay is an argument about state-mandated prayer in public schools, don't start by generalizing about religion; start with the specific topic at hand.
- **The Webster’s Dictionary opening:** If you want to open with a discussion of an important term, it may be far more interesting for you (and your reader) if you develop your own definition of the term in the specific context of your class and assignment. Anyone can open a dictionary to find a word’s meaning.

- **The book report introduction.** Example: Frederick Douglass wrote his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, in the 1840s. It was published in 1986 by Penguin Books. In it, he tells the story of his life. This introduction is what you had to do for your elementary school book reports.