

What, Why, and How?

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INTRODUCTIONS & CONCLUSIONS:

Definition and rationale
How to begin
What to avoid
Effective approaches and examples

WHAT IS AN INTRODUCTION?

An introduction is the opening paragraph(s) of an expository essay, which introduces the reader to the main topic or thesis, sets the tone, and provides background and/or context about the subject matter. Introductions are usually short (1 paragraph for shorter papers), but can be multiple paragraphs long if they are kept in proportion with the rest of the essay.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Authors use different introductions for different kinds of essays. However, there are some common reasons as to why introductions are important in an essay.

In general, introductions:

- Allow the reader to preview the content of the essay.
- Give necessary or helpful background and context on the subject matter.
- Introduce the primary text(s) being analyzed.
- Provide space to introduce major concepts that will be covered in the body of the essay.
- Establish the tone or mood of the essay (e.g. serious, informative, humorous, formal/informal, etc).
- Attract the reader's attention and make the reader want to keep reading.

HOW DO I CREATE ONE?

1. Before you begin:

Gather your notes and create an outline and a thesis. This will give you a sense of your paper and its audience. Decide on what material is needed in the introduction in order to make the rest of your essay clear.

2. Know what to avoid in an introduction:

- Avoid broad, general, or sweeping statements (“Since the beginning of time,” “In today’s world,” “There are many positive and negative sides to the argument”).
- Avoid the mechanical or making an announcement (“In this essay I’m going to discuss,” “My essay will be about”).
- Avoid overused lead-ins like dictionary definitions (“According to *American Heritage*,” “*Webster’s* dictionary defines ‘oppression’ as...”).
- Avoid being too specific. Save the specific details and examples for your body paragraphs.

3. Decide on an effective opening approach.

There are many ways to lead into an essay. Choose an approach that will fit your writing task, draw in your reader’s interest, and create a clear context for your argument. Here are some examples of different approaches you can use in writing an introduction but don’t feel limited to this list as there are many creative approaches you can use:

- Provide a brief anecdote (a short amusing or interesting real life story) or interesting example that is relevant to the topic.
- Incorporate a thought-provoking quote from the primary text or another outside source.
- Use a striking fact or statistic.
- Pose a relevant question that will get your reader thinking.
- State a problem that will be analyzed or solved.
- Connect your topic to a familiar experience the reader is likely to have had or a cultural reference they are likely to have shared.
- State a misconception and then correct it.
- Provide background information and/or history on the topic.

EXAMPLE

Using variations on the topic of literacy, here are some example introductions using some of the approaches listed:

- **Start your paper with an interesting example. Here is an example:**

In the past, those who could not read and write signed documents with an “X” in place of their name. However, because they could not read, they sometimes were cheated of their property and sometimes, signed away their lives. In our history, slaves were sold as property, not knowing how to read the deeds of their own sale. Former slave Fredrick Douglass wrote in his essay “Learning to Read” of how he became literate even though it was against the law to do so. **Douglass shows how literacy is vital in the fight against oppression and ensures that all people can have a voice in creating a just society.**

- **Start your paper with a misconception and correct it. Here is an example:**

Some students in high school often feel that learning to read and write well is a waste of time. They often feel that they have enough reading and writing skills to obtain and hold a job without further study. After all, some students reason, many jobs do not involve extensive reading and writing, especially jobs which focus on manual labor. However, many who get into the workforce end up finding out that basic literacy is not enough. At a certain point, the job may require looking at complex documents such as contracts which can be crucial to the outcome of the company. Those who cannot fulfill the needs of today’s jobs often find themselves under-employed or in low-wage jobs which keeps them below the poverty line. **Literacy is important in getting the tools we need to improve our prospects and to be able to contribute to the larger world.**

- **Start your paper with an important quote from an expert. Here is an example:**

Literary critic Lawrence Clark Powell once said, “Write to be understood, speak to be heard, read to grow.” What Clark shows is the multi-purposes of literacy. We tend to think of reading and writing as a skill, not a lifestyle. This attitude needs to change. Reading and writing needs to be as much a part of our lives as breathing. **Literacy plays an important part in knowing what is going on in the world around us. If we can read and write well, then we grow and learn who we are.**

- **Start your paper with a surprising fact or statistic. Here is an example:**

According to statistics put out by the Department of Corrections, nearly two thirds of California's inmates read below a ninth grade level. More than half read at a seventh grade level and a whopping 21 percent can't read a third grade textbook (Sterngold). In other words, most of our prisoners are illiterate. Those who are illiterate often feel trapped in their lives with few options. Many of these people get taken advantage of. Many cannot speak on their own behalf, especially when authority figures have command of the written word. The way to change this imbalance of power is to become literate. **In other words, literacy helps people to become autonomous and redirect their lives toward a more secure future.**

From: James Sterngold, "Illiteracy Reinforces Prisoners' Captivity," San Francisco Chronicle. 27 Dec. 2006. Web. 1 Sept. 2013.

- **Start your paper with a rhetorical question. The answer to your question leads to your thesis. Here is an example:**

With all the advanced ways to communicate through high tech, is the written word dead? This is what many media experts are asking. After all, emails are usually casual, content is readily available online, and most people have turned into visual thinkers anyway. But good reading and writing skills today are needed more than ever. On the World Wide Web, people are gaining access to more and more sophisticated documents. In fact, more communication is done through reading and writing, than through face-to-face interaction. **Literacy is important to be able communicate with the outside world. With good reading and writing skills, everyone has the capacity to understand the issues that influence their lives.**

- **Start your paper with an anecdote which is like a very short story. Here is an example:**

My brother did not go to college. He barely got out of high school. Currently, he owns and runs an automotive parts store. However, he has come to realize that many patrons come into the store not to buy parts, but to compare his prices to deals they find on the internet. As a result, my brother resolved to create a website, but he had trouble reading and applying the written instructions on building websites and creating content. His friends vowed to help them, but they too had such low writing skills that they couldn't help him either. My brother's business has survived through word-of-mouth, but other competitors who are more literate and more web savvy are able to reach a wider range of potential customers and achieve greater success. **Literacy determines career success in a wide range of fields and to not be literate is today's fast-paced technological world often means that you will be left behind.**

PRACTICE

These introductions are taken from student essays analyzing the same book *Enrique's Journey* by Sonia Nazario. Analyze and describe the different approaches each one used:

CREATIVE APPROACHES FOR INTRODUCTIONS:

- Provide a brief anecdote or interesting example
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(1) The Destructive Impact on Children "Left-Behind"

Imagine children growing-up with their mother and father for the first few years of their life, seeing them daily and forming habits with both parents, when suddenly, one or both parents leave. Although this occurs all over the world, this is starting to become much more of a problem for children in Central America where their parents are leaving their homeland and families to come to the United States. They are leaving for the opportunity to provide a better quality of life for their children by sending money that will allow them to have food, clothing, and will pay for school related expenses. Often, the children that are left behind are not able to fully cope with this loss because of their feelings of abandonment, as was represented in *Enrique's Journey*, by Sonia Nazario. The child's relationship with the parent who has left is damaged and becomes more difficult to repair the longer they are separated from each other. Parents who migrate to the United States have the intent of providing a higher quality of life for the children who are left-behind. However, the benefits aren't worth the potentially devastating outcomes that children endure due to their feelings of abandonment.

(2) There's Always Another Choice

Throughout my childhood, my father had to leave my mother, my two sisters and me for weeks and often months at a time as a large part of his job involved travel. When he came home, we were often shy with him, like he was a stranger visiting and before we could bond with him, he was gone again. As a result, I don't think we ever formed a strong emotional attachment to him and to this day, he still feels somewhat like a stranger. I know he worked to support us but I can't let go of the resentment over the lost years. When I read Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey*, I understood Enrique's deep resentment for his mother who left him to go to the U.S. when he was five years old to earn money for the family. Logically, I understood what drove her as they lived in extreme poverty and the future for her children was financially bleak, but emotionally, I didn't. I feel Lourdes, as a mother, could have made a better choice because when it comes to children, a parent's supportive presence should prevail over financial concerns.

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(3) A Resolution Long Overdue

The Federation for American Immigration Reform estimates that “Illegal immigration costs U.S. taxpayers about \$113 billion a year at the federal, state and local level” (FAIR). The U.S. government spends billions of dollars deporting illegal immigrants and billions more funding government programs to assist immigrants who are already in the U.S. Illegal immigration is hurting our borders and the economy. Sonia Nazario in her book *Enrique’s Journey* makes vivid the devastating harms of illegal immigration by telling the story of Enrique and his mother. Pushed by the poverty and the lack of opportunities in their country, year after year, millions of people like Enrique and his mother risk their lives trying to escape the impoverished life in Latin America and enter the U.S illegally. After years of debates and reforms, clearly the U.S. policies to solve the illegal immigration issue have proved to be both costly and inefficient. However, so far the main solutions the U.S. employs are immediate deportation of illegal immigrants and border security. The U.S. government should do more than just deporting illegal immigrants and enforcing border security. Instead the U.S. government needs to encourage and pressure the Latin governments to provide more jobs, government assistance and help improve the quality of life in Latin America so that immigrants like Enrique and his mom are not so pressed to cross the U.S border illegally.

(4) A Mother’s Choice, A Child’s Longing

Would you rather leave your child to improve his living condition by illegally immigrating to another country for better work or stay by your child’s side and watching him suffer from poverty and hunger? That hardly seems like a fair choice as it is a no-win situation. However, every year too many women throughout Central America are compelled to make this difficult decision, and that is where the story begins in the book *Enrique’s Journey* by Sonia Nazario. A heartbreaking and moving story of a fifteen year old boy, Enrique, who follows his mother, Lourdes, to America eleven tumultuous years after she leaves him behind to find opportunity there. Through Nazario’s work we experience the life of an immigrant child and mother and see up-close the strain endured by these families and the rejection that is felt by the children who are left behind. It is clear that unstable governments and economic policies in Central America must improve so that mothers won’t be forced to make the horrible choice to leave. A rich country like the U.S must intervene so parents can take care of their children in their own countries or else there will continue to be generations of children turning to drugs, crime, and gangs which have a devastating impact on all of us.

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(5) Putting a Price on a Mother's Love

“The most terrible poverty is loneliness and the feeling of being unloved.” -- Mother Theresa.

When the family unit is sacrificed for the sole benefit of financial stability, it can only lead to the destruction of its main motivation – the family. Driven by extreme impoverished conditions, the once tightly knit families of Central America are being divided as immigrants leave for the United States in search of better opportunities. The rising numbers of abandoned children set out on their own to find their mothers in the United States. The journey is dangerous without any promises of survival or success. But for the children they leave behind, dealing with the emotional trauma of abandonment is more difficult than the physical pain of hunger. The permanent scar it leaves on a child will never heal. Maternal abandonment leaves the children to deal with significant emotional, mental and psychological after effects (Gerlach). For every mother deciding to leave her children behind, there comes the risk of losing the love of your children. In Lourdes' case in *Enrique's Journey* by Sonia Nazario, her choice and her many years of absence cause her to lose a part of her son, Enrique, permanently.

(6) The Children of the Undocumented: A Struggle to Thrive

When you plant a seed, you must nurture it. You must provide it with the right amount of water, sunlight and a soil rich in nutrients. If any one of these elements is lacking, the plant will never grow properly. It may sprout initially, but it will become weaker until it withers and goes back into the earth. The same can be said for raising a child. To grow a well-rounded and secure human being one needs to provide food, shelter, and dedicated emotional guidance. *Enrique's Journey* by Sonia Nazario shows how the love and guidance a child needs from a parent is vital for healthy growth survival. Children are being left to grow wild, like weeds, so turn to hurtful nutrients like drugs and exist in harmful environments, like gangs. The sad truth is that Enrique's story is one of millions. As immigrants leave their families and children behind to migrate to the United States searching for economic stability, they are tearing apart the family structure for which they are making such huge sacrifices to preserve. By leaving their children behind, migrants are causing the deterioration of the Latin American culture and destroying its historically close family structure.

WHAT IS A CONCLUSION?

The conclusion is the last paragraph in the essay that brings the writer's argument to a close and makes the reader reflect on the discussion in the body of the essay. Conclusions provide effective closure for the discussion in the body paragraphs but don't simply summarize but rather look at the larger implications of the topic.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

So much is at stake in writing a conclusion. This is, after all, your last chance to persuade your readers to your point of view and to impress yourself upon them as a writer and thinker. The impression you create in your conclusion will shape the impression that stays with your readers after they've finished the essay. Your conclusion should be the best part of your paper.

The end of an essay should therefore convey a sense of completeness and closure as well as a sense of the lingering possibilities of the topic, its larger meaning, and its implications. The final paragraph should close the discussion without closing it off.

HOW DO I CREATE ONE?

1. Before you begin:

Read your entire essay and think of your larger purpose. What exactly does your reader need to think about as you close your essay? Review your thesis so that you know where the paper started. This helps you review and sometimes re-envision your thesis leaving you with a stronger more articulated argument.

2. What to avoid in a conclusion:

- Avoid beginning with "in conclusion" or "finally." Your reader should know the paragraph concludes the essay based on the content.
- Avoid directly copying your thesis to your conclusion.
- Avoid summarizing the whole paper.
- Avoid introducing new ideas. If you find yourself introducing a new idea, then evaluate the significance of the idea to see if it instead deserves a body paragraph.
- Avoid throwing the paper off balance by being excessively long or conversely ending with a conclusion that is under-developed and too brief.

3. Decide on an effective closing approach:

Authors use different types of conclusions for different kinds of essays. Below is a list of the more popular styles for conclusions but like with approaches for introductions, don't feel limited to this list as there are many creative approaches you can use:

- Reinforce the larger significance of the discussion showing your readers why the paper was important, meaningful and/or useful—answer the question “so what?”
- Propose a course of action.
- Make a prediction.
- Challenge the reader to look to the future.
- Establish a sense of closure in your essay by linking the last paragraph to the first, perhaps by reiterating a word, phrase, reference or idea you used at the beginning.
- End with a quotation from or reference to a primary or secondary source, one that amplifies your main point or puts it in a different perspective.
- Offer opinions that your reader might not have accepted earlier.
- Consider the implications or outcomes of your argument.
- Try to solve a problem you have raised.

EXAMPLE

Here are some example conclusions using some of the approaches listed:

- **Reinforce the larger significance of the discussion. Here is an example:**

Language is constantly changing. New words, influenced by our changing society, are continually enriching our vocabulary and our worldview. As a result, it is our task to keep up with the new and evolving terminology or we will be left out on a local and global level. As language unites us through newspapers, blogs, posts, emails, and texts, we must be open to new ways to connect through language and be ready to broaden the language we use. Having adaptable literacy skills is vital to remain in command of and an active participant in our ever-changing dialogue.

- **Make a prediction if the outcome is favorable or unfavorable. Here is an example:**

Great civilizations have left behind documents which are still used today in the court of law and which dictate our moral code. The oppressed have become free once they have harnessed the power of the written world. Frederick Douglass in his autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, expressed how literacy gave him the ability to see the injustice of his condition, "The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers." If we want to live in a society that seeks to uproot oppression and lives by a consistent moral code, the key is literacy. If not, if we fail to promote literacy, we will lose our voices and our abilities to oppose injustice and provide equal protection for our citizens.

- **Call to action. Here is an example:**

We must restructure our educational system and reexamine our educational values. Currently, the emphasis on standardized testing is not promoting the complex critical thinking and literacy skills needed to be successful in today's society. Rather, our education system must be fully committed to teaching a rigorous curriculum of reading and writing skills so that our students are able to continue the push toward progress.

- **Challenging the reader to look into the future. Here is an example:**

Strong reading and writing skills are essential for human progress. A society which is literate will grow and thrive, creating a better world for our children. However, technology is causing our literacy skills to deteriorate as we passively watch and listen rather than read and write. Also, if money continues to dictate who receives quality education, a larger illiterate class will grow, and we will lose the vast potential of future generations. We need to ensure that active literacy is both encouraged and accessible to all or else we will not progress but rather devolve into a passive, ignorant, and apathetic society.

PRACTICE

Analyze these conclusions and describe the different approaches each one used:

CREATIVE APPROACHES FOR CONCLUSIONS:

- Reinforce the larger significance
- Propose a course of action
- Make a prediction
- Challenge the reader to look to the future
- Link the last paragraph to the first
- End with a quotation
- Offer opinions your reader might not have accepted earlier.
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(1) *The Simpsons* has a great impact on its viewers, making the show a part of America's collective consciousness. While the Simpsons themselves have both positive and negative qualities, these negative qualities—these flaws—make them more human to us, more believable as a family. The positive qualities they exhibit, although not always as prevalent, give us both hope and make us believe in the goodness of modern humankind. We watch the Simpsons because they are a reflection of ourselves with all of our quirks and imperfections. The negativity in each show does not so much cause us to think of and feel evil or malice, but adds to the general enjoyment and provides material that leads to the discussion of a moral.

(2) So what are we to do in such a dangerous world? While our access to the Internet seems like any other natural right, it in fact carries a great deal of responsibility. And as much as we would like to extend that responsibility to everyone, we must realize that not everyone has the experience to act reasonably in such a dangerous domain. Currently we restrict the right to vote to persons over the age of 18 and the right to drink alcohol to persons over the age of 21 since we assume they are not ready to sensibly partake in these activities. We live in a time when freedom is more precious than ever. It is natural to want to extend freedoms and rights to as many people as possible, but we have to think of their safety. Just as no one has the right to put others' lives in danger—in a car on the freeway or a plane in the sky—children should not have unmonitored access to the internet if they are endangering themselves. We must help minors help themselves.

CREATIVE APPROACHES FOR CONCLUSIONS:

- Reinforce the larger significance
- Propose a course of action
- Make a prediction
- Challenge the reader to look to the future
- Link the last paragraph to the first
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(3) If young children do not realize that their parents speak from firsthand experience of their own youth, how can parents convince their children of their wisdom? The answer lies in the trust that must be established in the family. Parents need to make conscious efforts to set time aside to connect with and bond with their children even when children reach the ages when they seek more independence. Parents need to share their life stories with their children, even the ones of poor decisions and regret, so children can learn from their elders and avoid similar pitfalls. Children learn from and respect honesty and will trust and relate to their parents more if they are allowed to see that they too make mistakes. If children have learned to trust their folks, they will heed them, whether or not they understand the source of their knowledge.

(4) Challenges to homophobia and the rigidity of gender roles must go beyond the visible lesbian and gay movement. Lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals alone cannot defuse the power of stigmatization and the license it gives to frighten, wound, or kill. Literally millions of us are needed on this front, straight and gay alike. We invite any heterosexual unwilling to live with the damage that “real men” or “real women” messages wreak on them, on their children, and on lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals to join us. We ask that you not let queer jokes go unchallenged at work, at home, in the media, or anywhere. We ask that you foster in your children a genuine respect for themselves and their right to be who and what they wish to be, regardless of their gender...We ask that you invite your lesbian, gay, and bisexual friends and relatives into the routine of your lives without demanding silence or discretion from them...We ask that you stand with us in public demonstrations to demand our right to live as free people, without fear. We ask that you respect our dignity by acting to end the poison of homophobia” (Vasquez 165).

ANSWERS

Some of the approaches used in the introductions taken from the student on *Enrique's Journey* by Sonia Nazario.

(1) The Destructive Impact on Children “Left-Behind”

- * **Connect topic to familiar experience/cultural reference**
- * **Provide background information and/or history on the topic**

(2) There's Always Another Choice

- * **Provide a brief anecdote or interesting example**

(3) A Resolution Long Overdue

- * **Incorporate a thought provoking quote**
- * **Use a striking fact or statistic**
- * **State a problem that will be analyzed or solved**

(4) A Mother's Choice, A Child's Longing

- * **Pose a relevant question that will get your reader thinking**
- * **State a problem that will be analyzed or solved**

(5) Putting a Price on a Mother's Love

- * **Incorporate a thought provoking quote**
- * **Provide background information and/or history on the topic**

(6) The Children of the Undocumented: A Struggle to Thrive

This introduction didn't use any of the approaches that were listed in this chapter. Instead it used a metaphor approach comparing two unrelated things (sprouting seeds to raising children) to make a unique point. The approaches described in this chapter are potential ways to begin a paper but by no means should limit your creativity.

Conclusions:

Analyze these conclusions and describe the different approaches each one used:

- (1) Reinforce the larger significance
- (2) Propose a course of action and offer opinions your reader might not have accepted earlier
- (3) Try to solve a problem you have raised
- (4) Propose a course of action