

Introductions

Introductions are the way you gently but firmly lead your reader into your world. You help him see why he should care about what you have to say. Anything that gently but firmly does this is an introduction strategy. However, if you are stuck, try one of these common strategies.

Question

There are several reasons you might choose this introduction strategy:

- It's convenient. That's because writing prompts often pose questions you can borrow or adapt to create a hook.
- Your paper probably answers an inquiry question anyway—just ask the question up front.
- A good question might make a reader curious to keep reading—it involves the reader right off the start line.

Here are some examples:

*“What if Shakespeare had it wrong about love in Romeo and Juliet” (Trees)?
Does asking for voter identification at the polls violate citizens’ constitutional rights, and if so—which ones?
Should juvenile offenders ever be tried and sentenced as adults?*

🚫 Watch out! A question is NOT a thesis statement. A thesis statement is the *answer* to a question.

Illustrate

Illustration as an introduction strategy has the advantage of being versatile:

- A short-short story (anecdote) is visual. It easily engages the imagination.
- You can use events from your own experience.
- You can use current events. Read news. Read analysis of pop culture and current issues.
- You can use a story from another culture, country, or time. Think about your history class, family stories, or books you've read, or movies you've watched.

Here is an anecdote introduction that seamlessly connects to the author's main point:

“When I was young, my parents took our family to Haiti during the summers. For them, it was a homecoming. For my brothers and me it was an adventure, sometimes a chore, and always a necessary education on privilege and the grace of an American passport” (Gay 15).

🚫 Watch out! An anecdote—a short-short story—is *short*. Keep it short and make sure it connects to your claim.

Surprise us

You might have found one or two surprising facts or statistics in your research; set one aside for your intro:

- Alarming or unexpected statistics or research findings abound. Keep your eye out for one.
- You might start with something slightly blunt or non-PC (politically correct).
- If you are making an unexpected or unusual claim, start there. Then back up and explain a bit.

Here is what it might look like:

Sixty-five percent of entering community college freshmen cannot fluently read college level materials. I was a functionally illiterate college freshman.

🚫 Watch out! If you're going to go for blunt, be careful! Don't be offensive. It's a big, big world out there, and we all share it. So no name-calling.

Define something

A definition can be a good way to start narrowing down your focus:

- Use a dictionary, but then give the concept your personal spin. What does it mean to you?
- Use a browser to find unusual definitions, as in *The Devil's Dictionary* by Ambrose Bierce.
- Beware of inappropriate language and "definitions" on crowdsourced sites such as *The Urban Dictionary*.

Here are a couple examples of definition intros:

A bigot is "one who regards or treats the members of a group with hatred and intolerance" (Merriam-Webster). In other words, a bigot is a small person who has chosen a narrow, claustrophobic vision of the world.

Ambrose Bierce defines a bigot as "one who is obstinately and zealously attached to an opinion that you do not entertain."

🚫 Watch out! Nobody really cares what the Merriam-Webster dictionary says. Only use a standard dictionary definition if you plan to expand or subvert it in some way.

Quote someone

There's a big, wide world of quotes out there on every topic imaginable.

- Find topical, funny, or inspirational quotes on Quoteland or Brainyquote, for starters. Even Forbes has its list of favorite business-related inspirational quotes! (Verify famous persons' quotes from multiple sources. Fabrications abound.)
- You listen to music. You could probably already quote some lyrics if you tried.
- Think back to your literature class for a few lines from a poem that makes your point.

Here are two introductions using the quote strategy:

Mark Twain famously said there were three kinds of lies—lies, damned lies, and statistics. The governor's claims about the bullet train project are all three.

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/ Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." Yeats was describing the chaos that followed World War I, but his lines always remind me of the terrible months after my brother's suicide.

🚫 Watch out! You can't just plop a quote down and let it speak for itself—you have to connect it to your point. [Cite sources](#) and use a [quote sandwich](#) (or the [accessible version](#) of Quote Sandwich).

🚫 Also, beware! Not all lyrics are decent enough for academic writing, and some are cliché. Make good choices.

Make a comparison

If your mind finds analogies everywhere, this strategy may be for you.

- There are so many possibilities! What mechanical process, family relationship, cultural quandary, or historical event can you use to make your comparison?
- Comparison evokes familiarity (as long as you pick something likely to be familiar to your readers).

This comparison introduction puts technology and biology side-by-side:

Sometimes it seems that technology is evolving like a virus—very rapidly, favoring its own most aggressive and adaptable components, and locked in competition with human needs. If we're not careful, technology might kill us.

☛ Watch out! Avoid clichés. We've heard “like a needle in a haystack” and lots of other corny comparisons before.

Make a contrast

A contrast strategy uses an element of surprise:

- Contrast creates tension and suspense.
- Contrasts are often ironic, setting up a set of expectations and then contradicting them.
- When outcomes (such as research results or data analysis) turn out to be unexpected, a contrast intro might be effective.

Here is an example:

“In the Orwellian world of many college and university campuses, all faiths are welcome — but some faiths are more welcome than others” (Haynes).

☛ Watch out! If you create tension or irony and raise expectations, you have to defuse and resolve them satisfactorily.

Start in the middle.

If you're stuck on your introduction, don't think you have to start there. It may be easier to first write a working (good-enough-for-now) [thesis](#) and draft body paragraphs. As you write, one of these strategies may start to stand out to you. For instance, sometimes your supporting evidence includes examples from your personal life that could make a short-short introductory story. Or you may come across a surprising statistic that you could lead with. Circle back to the introduction later.

Contributed by Rosemary McKeever

Works Cited

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