

## On the Task of an Introduction

The introduction is the single most important paragraph in your essay. It determines the quality of your essay; it determines a reader's reaction to your essay; it provides an opportunity for your point to be made, to be rejected, or to succeed. A good introduction is impossible to write before your essay is complete, but many writers find that they're unable to begin without a beginning. What should you do? Revise!

An introduction has to introduce a reader to the essay. Here are several important components to that task of introducing: (a) a general hook to command the reader's attention to your topic must be given (b) the theme or topic of the source texts must be introduced (c) the source texts and their authors must be introduced (d) any problem or difficulty in the sources must be described and (e) your interpretive position must be posited as a solution to these difficulties or problems.

(a) The hook can be the most difficult part to write. Match your hook to your audience and topic well. A good hook supplies the reader with part of the reason for undertaking the task of reading your essay. Don't try to make it too much or too oddball—you can win the battle of attention and lose the war of authority.

(b) The themes of the source texts (and by extension, the themes of your essay) should dovetail neatly with your hook. After all, it is a hook for *your essay*. Identifying a setting out the significant issues of the texts that you claim expertise on is the first moment of your authority. Also, by setting forth the themes, you confine the subject areas of your expertise.

(c) The main sources that you use as the interpretive basis of your essay have to be identified specifically. After all, you aren't claiming expertise on all areas of a given topic, but rather on a specific area dictated by a specific text. The sources you've read and thought about are the sources of your authority, so specifying them is another exercise in your authority. Often, a one-clause (or at the most one sentence) summary of the text accompanies the introduction and identification of the text.

(d) The specific problems and difficulties of the texts you write about should be introduced. Take care here, since you are in a nutshell giving a rationale for your project. The identification and description of the difficulty, problem, uncertainty, or lack of clarity in a text is itself the beginning point for your essay. Any reader who misses the significance of these problems/difficulties/gaps will also miss the significance of your interpretation or solution to these problems. You should therefore proceed carefully in this matter, ensuring clarity.

(e) Your interpretive position as a solution to the text itself is the thesis of your essay. Only after setting out the difficulties and problems is your solution possible. You should set forth your interpretive position carefully, clearly, and in a detailed manner. This is your thesis, and it is the main point of your essay. Without a thesis, you have no point, and without a point your essay is a waste of a reader's time. Hence, this sentence is significant.

(f) Often it is advisable to structure your thesis to match the exposition of your essay. This is best accomplished after your essay is written, but it is also the case that a thesis that is unanalyzable is suspect. Many good introductions end by laying out the proposed process of interpretation, step by step.

At any step along this path, your introduction can fail. It can fail to hook the reader, fail to specify the topic or theme of concern, fail to identify the texts, fail to establish the expertise, fail to convey the interpretive problem, and fail to set forth the thesis. Craft your introduction carefully to ensure that it succeeds at each of these steps, and you will be well on your way to success in the essay.