



Introductions

The introduction to an academic essay will generally present an analytical question or problem and then offer an answer to that question (the thesis).

Your introduction is also your opportunity to explain to your readers what your essay is about and why they should be interested in reading it. You don't have to "hook" your readers with a dramatic promise (every other discussion of the topic you're writing about is completely wrong!) or an exciting fact (the moon can reach 127 degrees Celsius!). Instead, you should use your introduction to explain to your readers why your essay is going to be interesting to read. To do this, you'll need to frame the question or problem that you're writing about and explain why this question or problem is important. If you make a convincing case for why your question or problem is worth solving, your readers will be interested in reading on.

While some of the conventions for writing an introduction vary by discipline, a strong introduction for any paper will contain some common elements. You can see these common elements in [the sample introductions on this page](#). In general, your introductions should contain the following elements:

- **Orienting information**

When you're writing an essay, it's helpful to think about what your reader needs to know in order to follow your argument. Your introduction should include enough information so that readers can understand the context for your thesis. For example, if you are analyzing someone else's argument, you will need to identify that argument and possibly summarize its key points. If you are joining a scholarly conversation about education reform, you will need to provide context for this conversation before explaining what your essay adds to the discussion. But you don't necessarily have to summarize your sources in detail in your introduction; that information may fit in better later in your essay.

When you're deciding how much context or background information to provide, it can be helpful to think about that information in relation to your thesis. You don't have to tell readers everything they will need to know to understand your entire essay right away. You just need to give them enough information to be able to understand and appreciate your thesis.



For some assignments, you'll be able to assume that your audience has also read the sources you are analyzing. But even in those cases, you should still offer enough information for readers to know which parts of a source you are talking about. When you're writing a paper based on your own research, you will need to provide more context about the sources you're going to discuss. If you're not sure how much you can assume your audience knows, you should consult your instructor.

- **An explanation of what's at stake in your essay, or why anyone would need to read an essay that argues this thesis**

You will know why your essay is worth writing if you are trying to answer a question that doesn't have an obvious answer; to propose a solution to a problem without one obvious solution; or to point out something that others may not have noticed that changes the way we consider a phenomenon, source, or idea. In all of these cases, you will be trying to understand something that you think is valuable to understand. But it's not enough that *you* know why your essay is worth reading; you also need to explain to your readers why they should care about reading an essay that argues your thesis.

In other words, part of the role of an introduction is to explain to your reader **what is at stake in your argument**. As you draft your introduction, it can be helpful to think about how you arrived at your thesis and to take your reader through a shortened version of that process by framing the question or problem that you are trying to answer and explaining why it's worth exploring. It's not enough to explain why the topic you're writing about matters; rather, you need to explain what *your essay* adds to that discussion.

So, for example, if you were writing an essay about the Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs vs. Jackson Women's Health*, it wouldn't be enough to say that what's at stake is that "people care about reproductive rights." That would explain why, in general, someone might want to read about this topic. But your readers need to know why *your* thesis is worth arguing. Does it challenge an accepted view? Does it present a new way of considering a concept? Does it put the Supreme Court decision into a historical context in a way that is unusual or surprising?

- **Your thesis**

This is what you're arguing in your essay.



Tips for writing introductions

- If you are writing in a new discipline, you should always make sure to ask about conventions and expectations for introductions, just as you would for any other aspect of the essay. For example, while it may be acceptable to write a two-paragraph (or longer) introduction for your papers in some courses, instructors in other disciplines, such as those in some Government courses, may expect a shorter introduction that includes [a preview of the argument that will follow](#).
- In some disciplines (Government, Economics, and others), it's common to offer an overview in the introduction of what points you will make in your essay. In other disciplines, you will not be expected to provide this overview in your introduction.
- Avoid writing a very general opening sentence. While it may be true that "Since the dawn of time, people have been telling love stories," it won't help you explain what's interesting about your topic.
- Avoid writing a "funnel" introduction in which you begin with a very broad statement about a topic and move to a narrow statement about that topic. Broad generalizations about a topic will not add to your readers' understanding of your specific essay topic.
- Avoid beginning with a dictionary definition of a term or concept you will be writing about. If the concept is complicated or unfamiliar to your readers, you will need to define it in detail later in your essay. If it's not complicated, you can assume your readers already know the definition.
- Avoid offering too much detail in your introduction that a reader could better understand later in the paper.