



What Do Introductions Across the Disciplines Have in Common?

While different disciplines have different conventions and expectations, many aspects of strong writing are shared across the disciplines. Below, you'll find three examples of introductions written for Harvard College courses in different disciplines. While the introductions focus on very different topics, each one contains the key elements of an introduction: [orienting information, an explanation of what's at stake, and a thesis](#).

Each introduction has been annotated to show these three common features. If you have questions about what an introduction should look like for one of your courses, you should always consult your instructor.

Introduction #1

This is the introduction to a paper written by Talia Blatt '23 for a biology course called "Ecology: Populations, Communities, and Ecosystems."

Coastal dunes are key sites for the study of ecological succession – the process of structural change in an ecological community after a disturbance (Martinez et al., 2018). The further the dune is from the shoreline, the more time has passed since the disturbance, enabling a space-for-time substitution approach called a chronosequence. Dune succession is allogenic and primary: Pioneer species colonize bare land after an extrinsic, abiotic disturbance. Dunes are also biodiverse, heterogenous, and overexploited (Sarmati et al., 2019). Studying dunes thus fulfills the double role of investigating succession and using succession to further conservation goals, protecting important and fragile ecosystems.

Theories of succession remain contested: Frederic Clements envisioned a steady progression towards a climax community, which has been the traditional understanding. Conversely, Henry Gleason imagined a more contingent, polyclimax theory of succession, in which different organisms are adapted to live together in different environments.

Orienting information. The author identifies the area of study, defines key terms, and explains the purpose of studying dunes.

What's at stake? The author has identified a debate within her area of study about theories of ecological succession. A reader can see that the author of this paper is going to contribute to that ongoing discussion.



Using the sand dunes at Crane Beach in Ipswich, Massachusetts, this study uses the chronosequence approach to study primary succession, characterizing an ecological community’s change over time with the proxy of distance from the shore. I hypothesize that overall diversity will increase with time, as pioneer grasses colonize and facilitate shrubs and eventually trees. This biotic shift will likely be accompanied by an abiotic shift in soil texture, from coarse to fine. Altogether, I hypothesize that the dune chronosequence will show a progression in line with Clements’ vision of a maximally biodiverse climax community.

Thesis. The author explains that her study is going to align with one of the two theories she laid out above.

Introduction #2

This is the introduction to a paper written by Eliza Hirsch '25 for the course “Why Shakespeare?”

In the first scene of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Barnardo, a sentinel, begs Horatio to “once again let [them] assail [Horatio’s] ears” (1.1.37) with their story of seeing King Hamlet’s ghost for the past two nights. This image of ears being assailed characterizes Barnardo's story as an attack on Horatio’s physical person, with the idiom conflating the physical ear with the act of listening. The play mentions ears both figuratively and physically twenty-five times. Eight of these occurrences are in act one, a portion of the play which ends in the ghost’s telling Hamlet that Claudius poisoned King Hamlet through his ear. For comparison, the play uses the word “mouth” five times and the word “nose” only twice. Why, especially in conjunction with imagery of ears, does Shakespeare so frequently connect words and life-threatening physical violence throughout the play? In Hamlet, the motif of ears being physically attacked creates a connection between physical and verbal violence and ultimately suggests that the two are equal.

Orienting information. The author tells readers what the focus of this essay is going to be.

What’s at stake? There’s something that doesn’t immediately make sense—Shakespeare’s focus on the imagery of ears—and the author thinks this is worth investigating and explaining.

Thesis. The author offers an explanation for how readers should understand the relationship between the imagery of ears and physical violence in Hamlet.



Introduction #3

This is the introduction to a paper that Charlotte Baker '24 wrote for Social Studies 10.

From between the lines of his *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith emerges as a deeply pragmatic—if not cynical—thinker; he is concerned with the roots of commercial life, and he finds them in what he illustrates as the universal sovereignty of individual self-love. The 1776 inquiry's most recognizable quote—"It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest"—definitively identifies this love as the foundation of commercial society (*Wealth* 26-27). *The Wealth of Nations* garnered enduring clout, as Smith's philosophy in its totality was ultimately abstracted and politicized in defense of unbridled free trade and market deregulation. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, however, did not receive the same sustained recognition. At first glance, the Smith behind this earlier book, published in 1759, appears irreconcilable with the Smith behind *The Wealth of Nations*. When contrasted with *The Wealth of Nations*, this earlier version of Smith appears optimistic and soft: *Theory's* Smith identifies and explores the function of an original passion that he terms "sympathy," the human tendency to put ourselves in another's shoes (*Theory* 1). Given the profound differences between the two books—and the apparent differences between the temperaments of the writer behind them (are humans predominantly self-interested? Or are we naturally other-regarding?)—it is easier to let Smith's dichotomous selves exist in separate worlds; *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is easier left forgotten.

In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith's self-love-borne economy is organized by the "division of labor" (11). This term refers to the specialization that forms the basis of a commercial trading society. Smith designates the division as the inevitable result of trading itself—it flows naturally from our human "propensity...to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another" (*Wealth* 25). This is the extent of his reasoning here—humans are endowed with an impulse to barter and exchange. But what about us—or in us—generates this "propensity" (*Wealth* 25)? *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* answers this question. In this paper I will argue that

Orienting information. The author orients readers to the topic at hand: Adam Smith and his philosophy—and the apparent contradictions within his philosophy.

What's at stake? The author notes that in *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith has not explained why humans possess this "propensity . . . to truck, barter, and exchange."



Theory's notion of sympathy is intimately intertwined with the “propensity” that *Wealth* sees driving commerce (*Wealth* 25). According to Smith, sympathy endows us with a love for conversation and drives our pursuit of wealth, both of which lead to trade; additionally, Smith’s conception of sympathy is essential to barter. In performing these functions—initiating, driving, and facilitating trade—sympathy travels across and unites Smith’s two works; it is impossible to fully understand *The Wealth of Nations* without *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

Thesis. In this passage, the author makes her case that reading both of Smith’s works together answers the question she has raised—and thus both works must be read in order to fully understand *The Wealth of Nations*.