Drafting an Effective Introduction

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Generally, most introductions in academic writing aim to invite readers into a discussion by presenting the necessary context. Additionally, introductions serve to frame the larger conversation/topic of the paper for the reader and to present a “road map” of important points. The strength of an introduction can determine whether your target audience will want to continue reading or if they will set your paper aside in favor of more engaging material and analysis.

Tips for Drafting an Effective Introduction

Engage and orient your audience to welcome them to the paper: A key function of any introduction is to present your argument in such a way that your audience can enter the conversation and properly engage with your paper. Key questions to think about as you write your introduction with this in mind may include:

Why would people want to read my paper in particular?
How does my paper relate to my audience and what could it mean to them in their daily lives?

Provide key information and context to your audience: A key function of an introduction is to provide context, details, and facts that your audience will need to enter the argument or analysis. Providing key context and details within your introduction helps to limit the scope of your essay to the specific target of your analysis.

For example, a paper that discusses why standardized testing should be removed from secondary education could provide details explaining why standardized testing was implemented, describing the particular standardized test(s) is being discussed, and limiting the discussion to high school testing.

Use your introduction to focus your essay around a specific research goal or question: Within your introduction, it is appropriate to focus your research and analysis around a particular aspect of your topic or a research question. When drafting your introduction at an early point in your writing process, it may be helpful to have a tentative focus that you can come back to as you write the paper since your goals may change as write. For example, the essay dealing with standardized testing could go several different directions:

Is your paper focusing on how standardized testing can be made effective, or is it discussing how to remove standardized testing completely? Is your goal to propose an alternative to standardized testing?

What Not to Do When Drafting an Introduction
Given that introductions are such a crucial part of any academic paper, it is important to consider things to avoid when drafting an introduction. Common things to think about include ineffective opening strategies, questions of focus, and incorporating “fluff” or empty hooks in your introduction.

**Avoid the long-distance opening:** A common mistake that writers may make in academic writing is beginning with the broadest context possible relative to their paper. For the example paper dealing with standardized testing, an ineffective opening may begin with the historical beginnings of the educational system as a whole. Though this aspect may be related, it is too far removed from the topic being discussed/analyzed to provide constructive context within the paper.

**Be cautious with the funnel opening:** Though many effective introductions utilize the “funnel” opening where the introduction establishes a larger (global) context and moves to the specific thesis or research question. A broader topic allows for explanation and exploration, however remember to keep your focus on the specifics of your thesis/research question within the topic.

Instead of starting with a discussion of school testing in general, presenting the broader context of standardized testing first and moving to standardized testing in high schools and why it should be removed or changed may be more effective.

**Avoid the “book-report” opening:** Though a key function of an introduction is to provide the necessary context for your audience to engage with your paper, avoid providing only context within your introduction without indicating where your analysis is going or where it will end up. Your audience will be less likely to engage with your paper if they feel that it is only providing information and background without taking a definitive stance on the issue.

With the example paper about standardized testing, a book report opening would simply discuss facts about standardized testing such as when it was introduced in education, who introduced it and why the test was created.

**Avoid the “dictionary” or “accepted knowledge” hooks:** A common mistake that many student writers make when drafting an introduction is providing a dictionary definition as a means to engage their reader. This strategy often misfires because the dictionary definition or a statement of fact is not very nuanced and does not lend itself to discussion or analysis as readily as a structured and research opinion or research question.

If you need to define a key term in your paper for your audience to understand your topic, it helps to paraphrase the term in your own words instead of simply repeating the dictionary definition of that term. Unlike the dictionary definition, a paraphrase can help provide nuance that engages your audience. For instance, “decision error” in rating standardized tests may be crucial to discussing your topic, so defining it relative to your thesis/research question can strengthen your introduction.

Since many readers will not know every detail of the subject being analyzed, introductions help to engage the reader and provide them with an entry point into the research and analysis of a paper. An effective introduction goes beyond the facts while engaging your audience and promoting interest in your topic.