

INTRODUCTION

Functions of an opening paragraph:

- to engage the reader's attention
- to identify for the reader the central issue or subject
- to create the tone of the essay

One of many types of effective introductions: the funnel opening paragraph

The first sentence is the wide end of the funnel: a focused generalization that provides the necessary context and the subject.

Each succeeding sentence in the paragraph narrows the subject.

The last sentence of the paragraph, the least general statement, is the thesis of the essay.

An example of a funnel-shaped opening:

"According to the linguistic school currently on top, human beings are all born with a genetic endowment for recognizing and formulating language. This must mean that we possess genes for all kinds of information, with strands of special, peculiarly human DNA for the discernment of meaning in syntax. We must imagine the morphogenesis of deep structures, built into our minds, for coding out, like proteins, the parts of speech. Correct grammar (correct in the logical, not fashionable, sense) is as much a biologic characteristic of our species as feathers on birds."-- Lewis Thomas, "How We Process Information."

Poor introductions:

The truism: when a self-evident "truth" is disguised in pretentious rhetoric:

"Down through history, from Eve to Joan of Arc, from Cleopatra to Eleanor Roosevelt, we find that women have provided inspiration for men and molded their lives, their efforts, and their destinies. For the love of women, men have robbed, murdered, pillaged, gained riches, and gained greatness."

"There can be no doubt that studying requires concentration."

NOTE: Anything that goes without saying shouldn't be said (or written).

The complaint about difficulties of writing on the assigned subject:

"Who am I? This question is quite a difficult problem to analyze, even though it looks quite simple at a glance....Not many students take the viewpoint that I take, so I shall try to give an analysis of myself."

The personal apology to the instructor:

"After searching vainly for a subject on which to write which would be related to the assignment, I came to the conclusion that everything I considered as a possible theme had been pretty well 'hashed over' in class. Therefore, I gave up and succumbed to a desire I've had since very early in this course--to write about my personal experience with pinball machines."

The obvious dictionary definition:

"Before entering into a discussion of the wit of Oscar Wilde as displayed in The Importance of Being Earnest, it is first necessary to ask ourselves: what do we mean by wit? Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines wit as being...."

Facts no one needs to be reminded of:

"John F. Kennedy, who served as president of the United States...."

Platitudes--true, but hardly original or intriguing:

"The processes of life are awe inspiring."

- Excuses or confessions of the writer's insecurity or lack of knowledge about the topic:

"Ricardo's economic theories are extremely difficult to explain, but I will do the best I can."

In most fields of study in the humanities, an announcement of the content of the essay is a bad way to begin. In the social and hard sciences, other conventions often prevail:

"In this paper, I will explain...."

- **Useful beginnings: simple and direct openings are best.**

- A direct statement of fact:

"I underwent, during the summer I became fourteen, a profound religious crisis."--James Baldwin, "Letter from a Region in My Mind."

- A statement intended to startle the reader with its bluntness or frankness:

"Lie detectors lie."--Jonathan Kwitney, "The Dirty Little Secret of Lie Detectors."

- A question or series of questions

"How does the mind work? To answer that question we must look at some of the work performed by the mind."--Noam Chomsky, "Language and the Mind."

- An authentic illustrative anecdote:

"Someone said recently to an old black lady from Mississippi, whose legs had been badly mangled by local police who arrested her for 'disturbing the peace,' that the civil rights movement was dead, and asked, since it was dead what she thought about it. The old lady replied, hobbling out of his presence on her cane, that the civil rights movement was like herself, 'if it's dead it shore ain't ready to lay down!'"--Alice Walker, "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?"

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- **CONCLUSIONS**

- **Functions of a concluding paragraph:**

- To make one last effort to convince the reader
- To suggest larger implications now that the evidence has been presented
- To provide a satisfying sense of closure

- **Strategies for writing effective conclusions:**

- Make a useful analogy or comparison.
- Suggest specific actions that the reader should take in light of the information you've provided.
- Speculate about what your thesis implies for the future.
- Make a brief remark that sums up your feelings.

- **Poor endings:**

- The unnecessary summary: only lengthy, complex papers need a conclusion that summarizes the material covered in the paper.
- The empty cliché:

"So ends the analysis of myself and the question of who am I has been answered in a brief form."

- The unnecessary announcement

"And in conclusion, let me say...."

- The trite truism:

"And as for the future, only time will tell."

- The waste basket ending: do not try in the final paragraph to say everything you didn't have room for in the body of the paper.

- The fade-out:

"Researchers have so much more to discover in this area. Whatever we say now will be superseded in the near future."

- The wild surmise

"From this we see the utter futility of ever trying to help another person."

- The mirror image (the most common problem): the writer merely repeats the thesis and summarizes the main points--a dull and mechanical conclusion.

- *TITLES*

- **Write the title last.**

- **One function of the title is to intrigue the reader.**

- **The title should have the same tone as the essay..**

- **The title should be relevant to the specifics of the essay.**

NOTE: The title, the beginning and the ending of any piece of writing are "privileged" places in the text. You, as the writer, have the reader's most complete attention at those moments. Take advantage of that fact. Do not insult the intelligence of the reader by announcing what you will be doing or by pointing out what has just happened. Give the reader credit for having the good taste and intelligence to appreciate your most direct and polished writing. Revise the introduction and the conclusion especially aggressively.



Some of the above information was adapted from the following sources:

Greenberg, Karen. *Effective Writing: Choices and Conventions*. 2nd ed. New York: St. Martin's P., 1992.

Packer, Nancy Huddleston, and John Trimpane. *Writing Worth Reading: A Practical Guide*. 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford Books. 1989.

Watt, William W. *An American Rhetoric*. 5th ed. Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 1980.