

How to Write Introductions

Introductions? Here are some truths about introductions that I have found while wending my way through weighty tomes regarding composition:

- If readers don't understand what the writer is up to, they won't be much interested.
- An essay begins well when interest and clarity cooperate, each nourishing the other.
- In general, the beginning should offer clues not only to the subject of the essay, but also to the way it is to be treated, and the opening sentences should set the tone of the discussion.
- Both the writer and reader must have a sense that the starting point is a logical or natural one.
- A good beginning arouses expectations that the body of the essay satisfies.

A good introduction, generally speaking, does two things: it "Defines" for the reader what the essay (or other written work) is going to address; it "Divides" the topic of the essay into the parts to be "Discussed." Naturally, there are a great variety of ways to accomplish these two tasks, and they may require writers to use more than a simple "one paragraph" introduction. But the point is that a good introduction leaves readers with a good idea of what the essay is all about and how the writer intends to "attack" his topic.

And now to address the question, "How long do it hafta bee?" My typical response, of course, is, "It hasta bee long enuf ta do a gud job!" Generally speaking, most student introductions are from three to five sentences in length, depending on what the topic is and how the student wishes to address said topic. But remember, length is not all that important. What is important in a good introduction is establishing what the paper is about and how the writer is going to discuss his topic.

So, is this O.K.: "This essay will be about..." And the answer is, "Yes. As long as you're a junior high school student." Good writers, mature writers, use more sophisticated means of beginning an essay. Try to avoid the junior high school opening if you can. Here are two of my favorite introductions.

First, Somerset Maugham in his essay "Three Aims for Writers":

"I knew that I should never write as well as I could wish, but I thought with pains I could arrive at writing as well as my natural defects allowed. On taking thought it seemed to me that I must aim at lucidity, simplicity, and euphony. I have put these three qualities in the order of the importance I assigned to them."

In one "fell swoop" (by the way, avoid cliches), Mr. Maugham has identified for us that he will be talking about writing, and he also lets us know that he will specifically address lucidity, simplicity, and euphony--in that order. Wonderfully done!

Second, here is the introduction of an **essay** which appears in its entirety elsewhere in this OWL. The title of the essay is "The Three Africas":

"When many people hear the word Africa, they picture steaming jungles and gorillas. Hollywood films have shrunk the public image of this immense, varied continent into a small segment of its actual diversity. To have a more accurate picture of the whole continent, however, one should remember that there are, roughly, three Africas, each with its distinct climate and terrain and with a style of life suited to the environment. The continent can be divided into the northern desert areas, the southeastern grasslands, and the tropical jungles to the southwest."

Clearly, this essay will be about Africa, and the writer has given us the geographical locations she will discuss. Define and Divide. Now all that's left to do is write a conclusion which Drives home the main point or points of the essay.

The Four D's

1. Define.
2. Divide.
3. Discuss.
4. Drive Home.