Introductions: How Do I Begin?

An introduction should convince readers that the topic of the paper is important and that the writer is credible. But different circumstances call for different approaches to this task.

**Display Writing/A Sympathetic Audience**

A lot of professors ask their students to engage in something called *display writing*, where the purpose is ultimately to show the teacher what they have learned in class. An essay test is an excellent example of display writing. It gives you a chance to demonstrate to your professor, usually in a short amount of time, exactly what you have learned. The situation of this sort of writing—an audience who is eager to hear what you have learned, and a limited amount of time—calls for a particular kind of thesis: *a statement of your main point, placed* *near the beginning of the paper*, sometimes at the end of an introduction. (For short answer questions, you may even start your answer with this sort of thesis.)

**Argument/A Sympathetic Audience**

An *argument* is persuasive writing—it is intended to sway an audience to agree with you. Sometimes you are lucky enough to be “preaching to the choir”—that is, presenting a position your audience is predisposed to accept. This audience, like the professor who assigns the display writing, is eager to hear what you have to say. You can tell them your thesis right away, perhaps at the end of a brief introduction (1-4 paragraphs, depending on the length of your paper). The rest of your introduction should remind your readers why the issue is important and/or why it needs to be addressed now.

**Argument/A Hostile Audience**

If your audience isn’t already inclined to agree with you, you have to spend time building up common ground with them. In this case, you might want to extend your introduction and *delay your thesis*. Yes, you can do this! Take a look at some arguments on the editorial page of the newspaper or in periodicals. How many of these actually state the main point stated near the beginning? More often than not, when the audience is hostile or even neutral, the thesis of a paper does not appear until the conclusion.

If the thesis is delayed, readers need something else in the introduction to direct their sense of where the paper is going. You might try one of these alternatives:

* a thesis question: the question your paper will explore, with enough statement of the problem to intrigue readers
  + Ex. "Can China really rebalance its economy to be more consumer-led and open its financial markets to the world?" (Source: Matt Clinch, "How do you solve a problem like China," [CNBC.com](http://cnbc.com/) 11 Nov 2015.)
* a topic sentence: a statement that tells what the essay will cover but doesn’t give away your thesis
  + Ex. “Few industries have been shaped more by mergers and acquisitions than pharmaceuticals.” (Source: “Drug-fueled Couplings,” *The Economist*, November 7-13, 2015. p. 59.)
* a partition: an explanation of the questions or points you are going to examine or explore, and in what order (Classical rhetoricians called this the *partitio* from the Latin word for “part” or “divide”)
  + Ex. “In this paper, I will examine the Mars Project as it was envisioned and then enacted, with regard to several learning theories and learning environment philosophies, in order to see what went well with the project, and where there is room for improvement to accomplish the learning goals of the project.” (Source: Logan Pearce, “The Mars Project: An analysis of the effectiveness of teaching engineering and science concepts in a relevant context.” Paper submitted for an undergraduate education class. )

**Tried and True Forms**

Once you understand your writing task and audience, and know whether you want to state your thesis up front or delay it, consider which of these forms will work best for your paper:

Summary Introduction—Give the important background for your paper. This will be different depending upon the subject or discipline. What does an uninformed reader need to know in order to follow and appreciate what you have to say?

Funnel Introduction—Make a broad statement about the topic, then narrower statements, and conclude with your thesis.

History of the Controversy—“They say, I say”—Summarize what people have argued about a topic. Then demonstrate that there is a gap in the ongoing conversation, and promise to fill it.

Prolepsis—“They say”—Summarize your opponent’s objections, so you can refute them one by one.

**Bold Beginnings**

In writing, as in life, first impressions are important. Regardless of the sort of paper you are writing, you will want to start strong. You likely already know that you can begin with an *anecdote*, or interesting story. You might also try one of these techniques for your opening sentence or two.

* a question: “The presidency, it’s often said, is a job for which everyone arrives unprepared. But just how unprepared is unprepared enough?” (Source: Jonathan Rauch, “Amateur Hour,” *The Atlantic,* November 2015, p. 19.)
* a hard-hitting or unusual fact: “The average time between an attacker breaching a network and its owner noticing the intrusion is 205 days.” (Source: “The Cost of Immaturity,” *The Economist*, November 7-13, 2015. p. 58.)
* a pithy quotation: Leon Trotsky is not often invoked as a management guru, but a line frequently attributed to him would surely resonate with business leaders today. “You may not be interested in war,” the Bolshevik revolutionary is said to have warned, “but war is interested in you.” (Source: Chrystia Freeland, “Globalization Bites Back,” *The Atlantic*, May 2015, p. 82.)
* images: “To find the site of the paupers’ graveyard in Kilkenny, Ireland, you need to start at the mall: Step into the spacious shopping center just outside the city center. Pass locals sipping coffee and the stores selling fancy watches and the latest mobile phones. Walk outside the building into the unpaved yard.” (Source: Traci Watson, “Reclaiming Lost Identities,” *Archaeology*, September/October 2015, p. 48.)
* a problem: “Companies devote a lot of thought to sending people abroad. They offer foreign postings to their most promising employees. They sweeten the deal with higher salaries and big allowances, and sometimes help to find work for spouses. But when it comes to bringing the employees home, it is a different story. One study suggests that a quarter of firms provide no help for repatriates at all. Many others offer at best a few links to websites.” (Source: “Shumpeter,” *The Economist*, November 7-13, 2015. p. 62.)
* a concisely stated thesis: “Look around Europe, and one leader stands above all the rest: Angela Merkel.” (Source: “The Indispensable European,” *The Economist*, November 7-13, 2015. p. 9.)
* a contradiction or paradox: “It began among children. In the village minister’s house, two little girls crawled under the furniture, made silly noises, spread their arms out like wings and tried to fly. The strangest thing—to any person who has spent more than ten minutes on a grade school playground—is that it was strange at all.” (Source: Adam Goodheart, “How Satan Came to Salem,” *The Atlantic,* November 2015, p. 46.)

Credits:

Lester Faigley, *The Penguin Handbook*, 5th Edition

Trish Roberts-Miller, *It’s Just a Feather: The Craft of Scholarly Writing* (draft)