

INTRODUCTIONS

The following information is taken from Hans P. Guth's New English Handbook (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1985), 340-43.

Use your introduction to attract the reader but also to do important groundwork for your paper.

You will seldom write a paper requiring more than one short introductory paragraph. An effective introduction creates interest; it hooks the reader into the essay or story. It sketches out the territory to be covered, often by narrowing down a more general subject. It sets the tone (i.e., formal or informal) for the rest of the essay. Above all, it heads straight for the central idea (or thesis) to be developed in the rest of the paper.

Some common ways of introducing a theme are usually ineffective:

- * A **repetition**, often word for word, of the assignment.
- * A **colorless summarizing statement**: *There are many qualities that the average college graduate looks for in a job. Most of them probably consider the following important. . . .*
- * An **unsupported claim to interest**: *Migratory birds are a fascinating subject. Ever since I was a little child, I have been interested in the migration of birds. Studying them has proved a wonderful hobby.*
- * **Complaints or apologies**: *I find it hard to discuss prejudice in a paper of 500 words. Prejudice is a vast subject.*

EFFECTIVE INTRODUCTORY STRATEGIES

1. Relate subject to a topical event or current trend:

The Doom Boom

Until a few years ago, sex was a taboo topic; now death is being freed of its taboos, at least as a subject for frank talk. In a sense, death has come into fashion. In polite society, the act of dying no longer need be hinted at as "passing away." As opportunists discover that the hearse is a good bandwagon to jump on, the subject may even become overexploited. But the abuses that occur are far outweighed by the benefits. --Life.

2. Start with striking outward signs or symptoms of a trend or situation:

Patriotism Back in Style

Across the land, people are turning out in record numbers for holidays such as Flag Day and the Fourth of July. High school students are again entering patriotic essay contests sponsored by service organizations. ROTC programs, once scorned, are making a comeback on college campuses. Old-time patriotism is coming back into style.

3. Start with a dramatic case that leads into a discussion of a more general situation:

The Return of the Moth

Everywhere trees stood defoliated, stripped of all leaves. Sticky little creatures hung from branches and created a sickly coating on roads. People rushed to their doctors with rashes on their hands and faces. Gypsy moth caterpillars had once again infested the Northeast in record numbers. Plagues like the gypsy moth remind us that the age-old war between human beings and the insects that destroy crops or vegetation is far from won.

4. Approach a general subject from a personal perspective. Show your personal interest in or qualifications for the subject:

The Immigrant's America

*My grandparents, unknown to one another, arrived in America from the same county in Slovakia. My grandfather had a small farm in Pennsylvania; his wife died in a wagon accident. Meanwhile, a girl of fifteen arrived on Ellis Island, dizzy, a little ill from witnessing births and deaths and illnesses aboard the crowded ship, with a sign around her neck lettered "PASSAIC." There an aunt told her of the man who had lost his wife in Pennsylvania. She went. They were married. . . . I heard this story only weeks ago. Strange that I had not asked insistently before. Odd that I should have such shallow knowledge of my roots. --Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics**

5. Use a striking contrast to lead up to your key point:

We Are What We Wear

The late sixties was the height of the love affair between the media and youth. Movies, magazines, pop music, and advertising extolled the teenage girl--a long-haired, blank-faced disco-dancing adolescent wearing a mini-skirt and thin as a stick. Today, most women no longer want to look like teenagers. The new idea is the woman with both a career and a family. She's in her thirties or forties; she has character--you can see it in her face. The media are struggling toward a new image of the mature woman, wearing a classic suit.

6. Approach a serious subject from a humorous human angle:

Shelter from the Storm

"Pinniped Liberation Front" proclaims the frame around Peigin Barrett's license plate, in homage to flippered creatures everywhere. Barrett laughs about this and about the license itself, which carries the phone number of the Marine Mammal Center, 331-SEAL. Barrett, executive director of the center, is totally absorbed in her work: to nurse sick and injured seals and sea lions back to good health, then release them back to the wild. --Linda Currey Post, San Francisco Focus.

Except for sections indicated as being from Joan D. Berbrich's Writing Creatively (New York: Amsco, 1977), this information is from Kirszner and Mandell's Basic College Writing (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 66-73.

1. **DIRECT ANNOUNCEMENT**. Often, beginning and experienced writers alike choose to open their essays with a straightforward announcement of the argument to follow. This "no frills" approach moves a reader directly and boldly into the core of the essay. The writer's approach may be gradual--moving point by point from general introductory remarks to a specific thesis statement--or it may be "head on," stating the major point to be discussed at once. The thesis statement may therefore appear at the end of the paragraph or in the very first sentence.

Midterms or final exams are not the best place for subtlety; they are ideal situations in which to use direct announcement. The following first paragraph introduces an answer to the exam question "Choose two recent Supreme Court rulings and show how they have affected law enforcement in this country."

During the last twenty years, the Supreme Court has made many far-reaching decisions. The Warren Court in particular has been responsible for opinions that have significantly affected the rights of individuals accused of crimes. Several of these rulings have touched off debates among law enforcement officials. The two most controversial decisions of the Warren Court have been reached in the Escobedo and Miranda cases.

The thesis statement is announced at the end of this introduction. The paragraphs to follow will be about "the two most controversial decisions of the Warren Court." Reasons, examples, and explanations will be presented in the body paragraphs.

A write-up of a scientific experiment also calls for direct announcement, because its object is to describe, as specifically as possible, the purpose of the inquiry. Here, the "head on" approach is used.

This inquiry is to show that the rate at which you breathe is controlled in such a manner that under most conditions you are not aware of the changes in your breathing rate. This inquiry will also show the factors that influence breathing rate. These changes represent an adjustment to the body's respiratory needs. Also, it will show that people who regularly participate in sports have better control over their breathing habits than do nonathletic people.

Exercise 1: Using direct announcement, write an introductory paragraph on the topic "Should the Law Allow a Person to Take His/Her Own Life?"

2. **QUOTATION OR DIALOGUE.** A short quotation, a bit of dialogue, or even a particularly apt proverb or saying related to your topic can be an effective opening. If well chosen, the quotation should immediately attract attention. Useful quotations may come from the newspapers: statistics, campaign promises, advertising slogans, and even weather forecasts can all be used effectively.

A personal experience essay on a death in the family, written for an English composition course, begins this way:

"You're the man of the house now," my uncle told me. Two hours earlier, my father had taken ill on the job; within half an hour he had died of an embolism. In those two hours nothing seemed to have changed: my younger sisters were rollerskating outside, my mother was making coffee in the kitchen. But now I wasn't allowed to be a kid any more; suddenly, I was expected to grow up.

The essay need never refer to the writer's uncle again; the quotation is merely a springboard. The thesis statement is the fact that it's hard to grow up overnight; what the quotation does is to involve the readers in the situation immediately and to plunge them into the action to follow.

An editorial from a student newspaper uses a quotation to involve the reader in the discussion.

"A newspaper should print news, not opinions." This statement seemed to be popular after the last provocative issue of the Panacea, which was roughly 43 percent opinion. It seemed, too, that an oversensitive student body prefers to read ambivalent and dull facts, rather than opinions that challenge the overall sentiments of this college community.

Variation: (Berbrich 228): **The Joke Beginning.** The joke beginning is helpful when you are dealing with commonplace material. Just take a joke that is roughly appropriate and change it to fit your situation.

Example 1: *Have you heard the latest home-repair joke? It goes like this:*

Homeowner: *"It took me two years to realize I had absolutely no talent for fixing things."*

Repairperson: "You gave up?"
Homeowner: (matter-of-factly) "I didn't. The house did."

Jokes like this have become increasingly popular as the home-repair mania sweeps across America. They are told (happily) by carpenters and plumbers, and (ruefully) by homeowners who discover that "repairing repairs" is often woefully expensive.

Exercise 2: Beginning with a quotation or dialogue, write an opening paragraph for an essay on the topic "What Are the Advantages of Being the Oldest (Youngest) Child in the Family?"

3. **ANECDOTE.** Another way to begin an essay is with a brief anecdote or story, perhaps drawn from personal experience or a recent event. This device involves the reader with the essay immediately.

In the following essay, the writer uses an anecdote to set the scene.

Here's the situation. Barbara Blair is a staff nurse on the three-to-eleven shift with three aides and three other nurses. Suddenly, out of the blue, Mrs. Adams confides in Barbara that she and the other aides are fed up with the lack of direction, the lack of respect, and the lack of cooperation they get from the nurses. She mentions particularly the different expectations Marie Jones, the assistant head nurse, and Judy Smith, the charge nurse on Marie's day off, have for the aides. She also deplors the lack of respect the nurses show by ignoring the aides' recommendations and refusing to answer patients' bells. Barbara knows the complaints are justified and she promises to help. But what can she do? (Lori Wiley, "Tips for the Timid; or, How Can One Little Nurse Hope to Change the Rules?" Nursing 76).

Variation: (Berbrich 227): **The Suspense Hook** - a suspenseful story which makes the reader keep reading to find out what will happen next. This introduction is especially good when you're dealing with danger--physical or otherwise.

Exercise 3: Beginning with a brief anecdote, write an opening paragraph for a paper discussing the question "Is There Too Much Violence in Hockey?"

4. **DEFINITIONS.** If you plan to write an essay whose thesis statement involves a general, abstract, confusing, or obscure concept, the introductory paragraph must define it. Many concepts have more than one meaning, and you owe it to your readers to explain which one you have in mind. Or you may prefer to discuss several aspects of a topic. In this case, your reader should be advised of your intention.

A student essay begins with a definition of homesickness.

Homesickness is a longing to go back to some familiar thing you are leaving behind. The longing may be so great that it manifests itself in actual physical sickness. Homesickness need not be longing for the family or the home. You can be homesick

for an old job or an old friend as well. You can be homesick for anything you have left behind.

Exercise 4: Write an introductory paragraph on the topic "Have You Ever Been Discriminated Against?" Begin your paragraph with a definition.

5. **REFUTATION.** The strategy of refutation involves disagreeing with a widely held assumption or belief. This creates interest because it is provocative; contradiction immediately introduces conflict.

The opening paragraph of an essay on the question "Should Marijuana Be Legalized?" uses the strategy of refutation.

Many people, and many legislators, believe that the legalization of marijuana will cause a widespread increase in drug addiction and crime. Actually, as moderate legislation is beginning to show in some states, legalization probably will create a drop in crime as marijuana ceases to be a contraband and a black-market product. Also, it is reported that as its use has increased, use of hard drugs and the crime associated with such drug use have decreased.

The opening sentence announces the writer's intention to discuss two effects of legalization of marijuana: its influence on drug use and its effect on crime. The refutation begins with the word "actually." At other times it may be signaled by a word like "however" or "but," which serves to contradict the original assertion.

You can also begin a personal opinion paper with refutation. It is a natural choice for this student's course evaluation.

All through the semester I have heard other students complaining about how unnecessarily difficult this physics course was. They resented the fact that Dr. Frank expected us to know not only the mathematical formulas but the theories behind them as well. Many students criticized him when he asked us to write a ten-page paper examining the scientific history of a great discovery in physics. They claimed that this type of assignment was a waste of time. But I disagree. This is the first science course I have ever taken where I actually understood what I was doing.

Exercise 5: Using the strategy of refutation, write an opening paragraph for a paper on the topic "Is It Better to Begin College Immediately after High School, or to Wait?"

6. **PRESENTING A NEW SLANT.** Sometimes you may be asked to write an essay dealing with a very familiar topic. In fact, it may be so familiar to you that you may be hard pressed to think of any new arguments. When confronted by a topic such as this, you may be tempted to rehash all of the familiar overused points you have heard about the subject. This, of course, is boring not only for you but also for your reader. A better approach would be to admit to your reader that, although the subject is a tired one, you will present a new and exciting slant to it.

A student essay on the welfare system uses this strategy.

For years now people have been criticizing our welfare system. Its inequities have been exposed, its frauds revealed. Seemingly, all that can be said has been said. But seldom has the system been criticized from the point of view of the recipient.

The first three sentences predict the audience's reactions and objections to the topic; the fourth sentence, the essay's thesis statement, announces the writer's original angle. The essay will go on to discuss in some detail welfare recipients' criticisms of the system

A variation of this approach can be seen in the introduction to a paper written by a student in a public health seminar.

Sickle-cell anemia, a serious disease that mainly threatens blacks, has recently become the target of an extensive health campaign on both state and federal levels. This campaign has been received by the public with tremendous approval. It's about time, however, that the other side of the story was revealed. For, although the programs to test for and treat the disease have undoubtedly been undertaken with good intentions, they have had some decidedly negative effects.

Exercise 6: Write an introductory paragraph for an essay on the question "What Are the Advantages of Being Male (or Female)?" Try to provide a new slant on this much discussed topic.

7. **SERIES OF UNRELATED FACTS.** One way to draw your readers into your paper is to make them curious about how you will find a thesis statement among a series of seemingly unrelated events or details. They discover along with you the one thing all these details have in common.

A personal experience essay uses this approach.

Early in June, 1975, a man in my neighborhood was shot to death by a robber. Two days later a riot broke out. Late that month my brother's wife gave birth to my mother's first grandchild. My mother never saw her grandchild, for she had suffered a stroke and had been in a coma since April. She died in July. In August my sister received a full scholarship that enabled her to become the first member of my family to attend college. The horror and joy of the summer of '75 will always be part of me: they taught me the profoundest lesson of my life: human existence can be a living hell, but love and hope can make hell bearable.

At first, you were probably puzzled as to what the essay was going to be about. Your curiosity may have encouraged you to continue reading. The essay following this introduction does not necessarily have to deal with each of the seemingly unrelated occurrences. Although the writer could have discussed each one in the body of his essay, he didn't; they were simply devices to get to the thesis statement in an interesting way.

Exercise 7: Using a series of unrelated facts to introduce your subject, write an opening paragraph for a paper on the topic "What Do You Think Is Your Worst Habit?"

8. **QUESTION.** Beginning an essay with a question, a series of questions, or even a riddle may be a particularly provocative strategy. The writer may answer the question, or leave it hanging (which is called a "rhetorical question"); in either case, most readers will want to read on. The question approach is especially effective if the question concerns the readers themselves.

In the following book report, the writer uses a question to introduce his subject.

What was it like to be a black man in the Deep South during the nineteen-fifties? John Howard Griffin answers this question in his fascinating book, Black Like Me. Griffin, a white writer, chemically turned his skin black and traveled throughout the rural areas and large cities of the South. Black Like Me convincingly illustrates the discrimination southern black people faced daily.

The arresting opening question creates immediate interest. Curious, the reader wants to learn the answer. The paragraph then identifies the book and states the report's thesis statement.

A question can also be used to strike an informal, almost conversational note. The following paragraph opens with a question which draws the reader immediately into the central concerns of the essay.

Ever had trouble calling a married woman friend because you didn't know her phone number or her husband's first name? In Israel and Switzerland, the names of both husband and wife appear in the telephone directories. And, if Assistant Attorney General William Griffin and Attorney Mary Skinner have their way, the state of Vermont will follow suit. (Suzanne Bailey, "Double Entry at Last," Ms.)

Exercise 8: Beginning with a question, write an introductory paragraph on the topic "Should the Government Compensate Homemakers for Housework?"