

THE "WRITE" STUFF

Springfield College

School of Human Services

INTRODUCING . . . YOUR ESSAY!

Nearly everyone agrees that the beginning and the ending of any piece of writing are really important. Many readers don't bother to finish a piece if the first paragraph doesn't grab their attention. Relatedly, others don't remember much about a piece if the last paragraph doesn't provide a sense of closure and finality.

Even though we recognize the importance of introductions and conclusions, most of us struggle with how to start and end our essays. Have you ever struggled with how to begin a piece of writing? If so, read on!

INTRODUCTIONS

Almost everyone has heard this bad piece of writing "advice": *Say what you're gonna say; say it; and tell 'em what you said.* Although this "advice" implies that you need an introduction, a "body," and a conclusion, it doesn't offer much else. Think of a novel. Would you want the first page to give away the plot, the rest of the book to elaborate on it, and the last page to summarize it? Of course not! You'd have no incentive to read the whole book!

Of course, academic essays are not novels. They serve a different purpose. However, that doesn't mean they have to be repetitive and dull. A well-written introduction gives readers a sense of the author's thesis and arguments, and piques readers' interest.

Try one of the following strategies for writing an effective introduction. No particular strategy is "better" than the others; they all provide information to readers and give life to one's writing. Practice them, and you will soon be able to determine which strategy best suits your purpose and content in any given writing assignment.

State your main ideas using the "news lead." This is a variation of "tell 'em what you're gonna say." You can be informative yet lively by opening with a sentence that tells readers the *who, what, where, when*--and sometimes the *why* and *how*--of your topic. Here's an example: *Students who applied to SHS-Boston for Fall, 2001 cited the weekend class schedule, the focus on the adult learner, the opportunity to earn college credit for prior learning, and the diversity of the student population as their top reasons*

for choosing the school. This sentence gives a lot of information in a "crisp" style that avoids the mind-numbing phrases in this introduction: *"In this essay, I will explore the four main reasons why students applied to SHS-Boston for the upcoming term."*

Move from the general to the specific. Say that you're writing an essay on classism. You could begin with a general statement about bias, such as: *Most Americans agree that it's wrong to discriminate against someone on the basis of characteristics that are not relevant to the individual's ability to perform a job--like race, gender, religious preference, or sexual orientation.* Then, you could narrow your focus to classism: *However, many Americans feel free to discriminate on the basis of another characteristic that does not in itself affect one's ability: socio-economic class.* You could then further explain your topic: *Many Americans stereotype the poor as stupid and lazy, and openly discriminate against them.* Finally, you could "home in" on your particular thesis: *Americans want to believe that individuals have unfettered opportunity to become whatever they choose, when in fact social and economic conditions in America are more limiting than we would like to admit.*

You've now set a "context" for your ideas and focused your readers' attention on your particular concerns.

Startle your readers. Sometimes writers get their readers' attention by startling them. Suzan Shown Harjo does so in her essay, "Last Rites for the Indian Dead," which begins with the question: *What if museums, universities and government agencies could put your dead relatives on display or keep them in boxes to be cut up and otherwise studied?* (She then proves that this is exactly how hundreds of thousands of deceased Native Americans have been treated.) Harjo's shocking question compels you to read on.

Start with the opposite side. Newspaper editorial writers are famous for this. For instance, if Harjo were to begin with the "opposite side" of her argument, she might have written something like this: *For hundreds of years, museums, universities, government agencies, and private collectors have bought and displayed Native American bones and funerary objects. Those who do so would probably say that they intend to show respect for and to promote public appreciation for indigenous culture. However, I believe their true motive is greed.*

Starting with the opposite side gets your opponents' points "out of the way" right away so that your readers can focus on your argument.

Tell a story. It's simply a fact that people like stories. One of the best ways to draw your readers' interest is to lead off with a story, if it's appropriate to do so. For instance, Harjo quickly follows her shocking opening question with an account of unarmed Cheyenne people massacred at Sand Creek who were "exhumed only hours after

being buried" and "decapitated"; she goes on to describe how their severed heads were then "shipped to Washington as freight." I bet that got your attention!

If you do start with a story, make sure to create a smooth transition from your tale to your thesis.

A final note: Of course it's useful to articulate your tentative thesis statement and supporting arguments before you sit down to write. However, that does not mean that you have to begin your draft by writing your introduction. In fact, many people find it easier to write the introduction LAST, and to compose several different versions of it to find the one that works best.