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Writing introductions and conclusions for essays

Paragraphs with special requirements

An introduction should tell your reader exactly what your paper is about and how it is structured.

Introductions are usually 5-10% of the length of an a typical essay. Readers gain their first impressions of a paper from this section, so an effective introduction is vital.

Generally, introductions begin with some brief **background** or **contextual information** that provides a focus for your paper.

This should be followed by a clear articulation of your controlling argument or point of view - a sentence that is sometimes called a **thesis statement**. The thesis statement must directly and clearly respond to the set question or topic and can sometimes be indicated by phrases such as; "This paper will argue that ..." or "This essay will advance the idea that ..."

Next, an **overview** of **how** you will support your argument should be presented, with a clear preview of the order in which you will proceed; this process can be indicated by such phrases as "In order to explore these issues, this paper will first..."; "This will be followed by ..."; "The paper will conclude with..." etc.

The introduction should also clarify how you intend to **interpret** or **limit** the question. You may also need to **define key terms**, or theoretical approaches.

Do not 'pad' your introduction with too much detail or references from other sources, rather, relate this section *directly* to the set question or topic. It can be useful to incorporate some of the actual words of the question into your introduction.

The introduction should tell your reader:

- How you understand the topic (e.g. context, background, key terms)
- What your controlling argument is
- What issues you will cover (and in which order)
- Highlight ideas as major or minor (for longer essays)
- What conclusion you will reach

Writing an essay is not like writing a mystery novel with an unfolding plot. Aim to be transparent and direct. Your reader should not have to read several pages before finding out what your argument or thesis is; it needs to be in the introduction.

Following is an example of an introduction with its key aspects identified in the text boxes.

Question (from Arts): *To what extent can the American Revolution be understood as a revolution 'from below'? Why did working people become involved and with what aims in mind?*

Historians generally concentrate on the twenty year period between 1763 and 1783 as the period which constitutes the American Revolution. However, when considering the involvement of working people, or people from below, in the revolution it is important to make a distinction between the pre- revolutionary period 1763-1774 and the revolution of 1774- 1788 , marked by the establishment of the continental Congress (1). This paper will argue that the nature and aims of the actions of working people are difficult to assess as it changed according to each phase. The pre-revolutionary period was characterised by opposition to Britain's authority. During this period the aims and actions of the working people were more conservative as they responded to grievances related to taxes and scarce land, issues which directly affected them. However, examination of activities such as the organisation of crowd action and town meetings, pamphlet writing, formal communications to Britain of American grievances and physical action in the streets, demonstrates that their aims and actions became more revolutionary after 1775.

Sets general context of the period

How the key term 'from below' is interpreted

Thesis statement or statement of argument

Indication of conclusion

Elaboration on content of essay



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The conclusion

A conclusion should bring together different sections of your essay. The assertions you made in your introductory paragraph should have been fully developed and substantiated through the essay, so that the conclusion can bring together all of the strands of the argument, refer back to the essay topic and end on a well-reasoned, logical note.

Remember that your conclusion should not offer any new material. Rather, consider telling your reader:

- what the significance of your findings, or the implications of your conclusion, might be;
- whether there are other factors which need to be looked at, but which were outside the scope of the essay;
- how your topic links to the wider context ('bigger picture') in your discipline.

Don't simply repeat yourself in this section. A conclusion which merely summarises is repetitive and reduces the impact of your paper.

A conclusion follows that matches the introduction with its key aspects identified in the text boxes.

Although, to a large extent, the working class were mainly those in the forefront of crowd action and they also led the revolts against wealthy plantation farmers, the American Revolution was not a class struggle. Working people participated because the issues directly affected them - the threat posed by powerful landowners and the tyranny Britain represented. Whereas the aims and actions of the working classes were more concerned with resistance to British rule during the pre revolutionary period, they became more revolutionary in nature after 1775 when the tension with Britain escalated. With this shift, a change in ideas occurred. In terms of considering the Revolution as a whole range of activities such as organising riots, communicating to Britain, attendance at town hall meetings and pamphlet writing, a difficulty emerges in that all classes were involved. Therefore, it is impossible to assess the extent to which a single group such as working people contributed to the American Revolution.

Statement of the concluding position of the essay

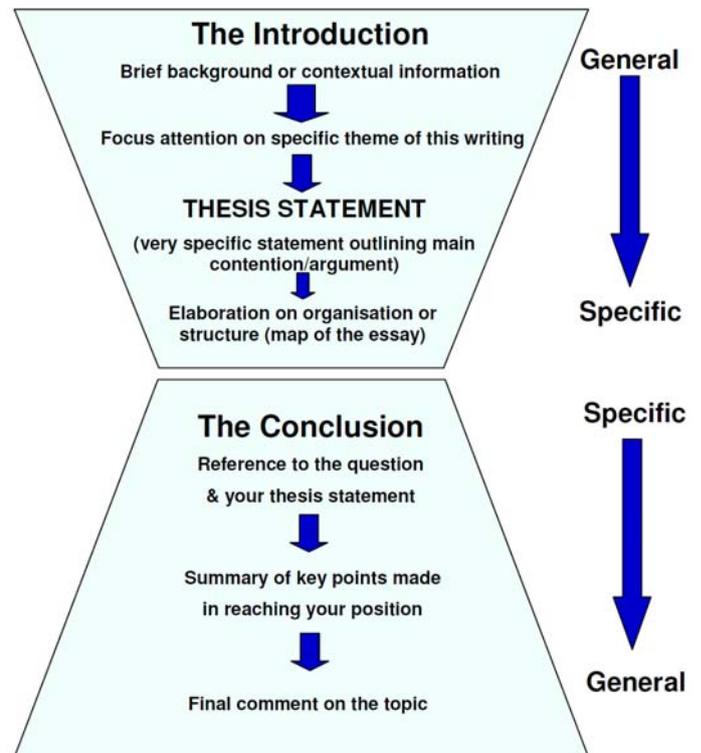
Summary of key argument

Re-statement of controlling argument

Final thought; reference back to the question and restatement of conclusion

Key structural elements of introductions and conclusions

Note how the Introduction moves from general information to specific, while the Conclusion works in reverse; from specific to general.



Further resources

- Bate, D. & Sharpe, P. (1996). *Writer's Handbook: how to write better essays*. Sydney: Harcourt Brace.
- Clanchy, J., & Ballard, B. (1986). *Essay Writing for Students: a practical guide*. Melbourne: Longman.
- Germov, J. (2011). *Get great marks for your essays, reports and presentations* (3rd ed.). NSW: Allen and Unwin.
- Jordan, R.R. (1999). *Academic Writing Course*. (3rd ed.). Oxfordshire: Longman.
- Strunk, W., Jr. & White, E.B. (1979). *The elements of style* (3rd ed.). New York: Macmillan.
- Using English for Academic Purposes: A guide for students in Higher Education* [online]. Retrieved July 2011 from <http://www.uefap.com/>

* Intro and Conclusion adapted from a student paper



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