



**Academic Support Center
Writing Center**

Introductory Paragraphs in Formal and Informal Papers

Resource: Capital Community College

The Introductory Paragraph in Formal Writing

How does the introductory paragraph for formal papers differ from expository or creative papers?

The idea that the term “attention-getter” means that the introduction has to “grasp” the reader’s attention mainly applies to creative or expository story writing. Therefore, this style is inappropriate for writing formal papers, such as history, research, education, science, and literature.

While the opening paragraph should be written in such a fashion that encourages the reader *to want* to read the paper, the introductory paragraph is supposed to serve as an **introduction**—or an **overview**—of what the paper is about.

What information is needed for the introductory paragraph?

In addition to a thesis statement, which must be included in any essay, the introduction for formal papers consists **of all or as many** of the following elements as are appropriate to the paper’s topic:

- **who** the paper is about
- **what** the paper is about
- **where** the topic takes place
- **when** the idea(s) occurred
- **how** the event(s), technique(s), idea(s) transpired
- **significance** of the topic

Where does the thesis statement belong in the introductory paragraph?

The placement of the thesis will vary depending on professors’ instructions. Regardless, the thesis sentence must be present and clearly stated. Without it, the rest of the paper will lack clear focus and structure.

The Introductory Paragraph in English Composition: Expository (or Creative) Writing

The **introductory paragraph**, or opening paragraph, is the first paragraph of your essay. It introduces the main idea of your essay, captures the interest of your readers, and tells why your topic is important.

The Introductory Paragraph Starts with a Great First Sentence

The introductory paragraph of any paper, long or short, should start with a sentence that piques the interest of your readers. In a typical essay, that first sentence leads into two or three more sentences that provide details about your subject or your process. All of these sentences build up to your thesis statement.

The thesis statement is the main subject/idea of the essay. The entirety of your paper hangs on that sentence, but its function is to be informative and direct. **The thesis is the core idea—topic—focus--of the paper. It serves as the paper's purpose, or the reason for writing about a given subject.** This means it's not normally very exciting.

Your First Sentence

To get your paper off to a great start, you should try to have a first sentence that engages your reader. Think of your first sentence as a hook that draws your reader in. As you have researched your topic, you have probably discovered many interesting anecdotes, quotes, or trivial facts; these make great hooks to use for an engaging introduction.

Consider these ideas for creating a strong beginning:

- **Surprising fact:** *The pentagon has twice as many bathrooms as are necessary.* The famous government building was constructed in the 1940s when segregation laws required that separate bathrooms be installed for people of African descent. This building is not the only American icon that harkens back to this embarrassing and hurtful time in our history. Across the United States, there are many examples of leftover laws and customs that reflect the racism that once permeated American society.

- **Humor:** *When my older brother substituted fresh eggs for our hard-boiled Easter eggs, he didn't realize our father would take the first crack at hiding them.* My brother's holiday ended early that particular day in 1991, but the rest of the family enjoyed the warm April weather, outside on the lawn, until late into the evening. Perhaps it was the warmth of the day and the joy of eating Easter roast while Tommy contemplated his actions that make my memories of Easter so sweet. Whatever the true reason, the fact is that my favorite holiday of the year is Easter Sunday.
- **Quotation:** *Hillary Rodham Clinton once said that "There cannot be true democracy unless women's voices are heard."* In 2006, when Nancy Pelosi became the nation's first female Speaker of the House, one woman's voice rang out clear. With this development, democracy grew to its truest level ever in terms of women's equality. This historical event also paved the way for Senator Clinton as she warmed her own vocal chords in preparation for a presidential race.

Finding the Hook

In each example, the first sentence draws the reader in to find out how the interesting fact leads to a point. You can use many methods to capture your reader's interest:

- **Curiosity:** *A duck's quack doesn't echo.* Some people might find a deep and mysterious meaning in this fact...
- **Definition:** *A homograph is a word with two or more pronunciations.* Produce is one example...
- **Anecdote:** *Yesterday morning I watched as my older sister left for school with a bright white glob of toothpaste gleaming on her chin. I felt no regret at all until she stepped onto the bus...*

End with a Good Beginning

Once you complete a first draft of your paper, go back to re-construct your introductory paragraph. Be sure to check your thesis statement to make sure it still holds true—then double check your first sentence to give it some zing.

Things NOT to do in an introductory paragraph:

- **Apologize.** Never suggest that you don't know what you're talking about, or that you're not enough of an expert that your opinion would not matter. Your reader will quickly turn to something else. Avoid phrases like the following:
 In my [humble] opinion . . .
 I'm not sure about this, but . . .

- **Announce your intentions.** Do not flatly announce what you are about to do in an essay.
 In this paper I will . . .
 The purpose of this essay is to . . .

Get into the topic and let your reader perceive your purpose in the topic sentence of your beginning paragraph.

- **Use a dictionary or encyclopedia definition.**
 According to Merriam-Webster's Webster Dictionary, a widget is . . .

Although definitions are extremely useful, and it might serve your purpose to devise your own definition(s) later in the essay, you want to avoid using this clichéd beginning to an essay.

- **Waste time.** Get to it. Move confidently into your essay. Many writers find it useful to write a warm-up paragraph (or two, even) to get them into the essay, to sharpen their own idea of what they're up to, and then they go back and delete the running start.