

Writing Effective Introduction Paragraphs for Your Essays

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I. General Principles of an Effective Introduction Paragraph

1. It piques your readers' interest (often called a "hook").
2. It is compelling.
3. It is timely.
4. It is relevant to the human condition and to your topic.
5. It transitions to your topic and/or thesis.

II. Ten Types of Paragraph Introductions

One. Use a blunt statement of fact or insight that captures your readers' attention:

John Taylor Gatto opens his essay "Against School: How Public Education Cripples Our Kids, and Why" this way:

I taught for thirty years in some of the worst schools in Manhattan, and in some of the best, and during that time I became an expert in boredom. Boredom was everywhere in the world, and if you asked the kids, as I often did, why they felt so bored, they always gave the same answers: They said the work was stupid, that it made no sense, that they already knew it. They said they wanted to be doing something real, not just sitting around. They said teachers didn't seem to know much about their subjects and clearly weren't interested in learning more. And the kids were right: Their teachers were every bit as bored as they were. Boredom is the common condition of schoolteachers, and anyone who has spent time in a teacher's lounge can vouch for the low energy, the whining, the dispirited attitudes, to be found there. When asked why they feel bored, the teachers tend to blame the kids, as you might expect. Who wouldn't get bored teaching students who are rude and interested only in grades? If even that. Of course, teachers are themselves products of the same twelve-year compulsory school programs that so thoroughly bore their students, and as school personnel they are trapped inside structures even more rigid than those imposed upon the children. Who, then, is to blame?

Two. Write a definition based on the principles of extended definition (term, class, distinguishing characteristics) or quote an expert in a field of study:

Metacognition is an essential asset in mature people characterized by their ability to value long-term gratification over short-term gratification, their ability to distance themselves from their passions when they're in a heated emotional state, their ability to stand back and see the forest instead of the trees, and their ability to continuously make assessments of the effectiveness of their major life choices. In the fiction of John Cheever and James Lasdun, we encounter characters that are woefully lacking in metacognition evidenced by _____, _____, _____, and _____.

Three. Use an insightful quotation that has not, to your knowledge anyway, been overused:

"Don't aim at success. The more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it. I want you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will live to see that in the long-run—in the long-run, I say!—success will follow you precisely because you had forgotten to think about it" Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*

Four. Use a startling fact to get your reader's attention:

"The report that everybody's talking about this morning is Oxfam's opus on global inequality, which leads with an eye-popping statistic: The richest 85 people in the world own more wealth than the bottom half of the entire global population. Yes, that equation works out to: 85 > 3,000,000,000."
Derek Thompson, *The Atlantic*

Five. Use an anecdote (personal or otherwise) to get your reader's attention:

One afternoon I was napping under the covers when Lara walked into the room talking on the phone to her friend, Hannah. She didn't know I was in the room, confusing the mound on the bed with a clump of pillows and blankets. I heard her whisper to Hannah, "I found another small package from eBay. He's buying watches and not telling me." That's when I thought about getting a post office box.

This could be the opening introduction for an essay topic about "economic infidelity" in which spouses shop behind their spouses' backs.

Six. Use a piece of vivid description or a vivid illustration to get your reader's attention:

My gym looks like an enchanting fitness dome, an extravaganza of taut, sweaty bodies adorned in fluorescent spandex tights contorting on space-age cardio machines, oil-slicked skin shrouded in a synthetic fog of dry ice colored by the dizzying splash of lavender disco lights. Tribal drum music plays loudly. Bottled water flows freely, as if from some Elysian spring, over burnished flesh. The communal purgation appeals to me. My fellow cardio junkies and I are so self-abandoned, free, and euphoric, liberated in our gym paradise. But right next to our workout heaven is a gastronomical inferno, one of those all-you-can-eat buffets, part of a chain, which is, to my lament, sprouting all over Los Angeles. I despise the buffet, a trough for people of less discriminating tastes who saunter in and out of the restaurant at all hours, entering the doors of the eatery without shame and blind to all the gastrointestinal and health-related horrors that await them. Many of the patrons cannot walk out of their cars to the buffet but have to limp or rely on canes, walkers, wheelchairs, and other ambulatory aids, for it seems a high percentage of the customers are afflicted with obesity, diabetes, arthritis, gout, hypothalamic lesions, elephantiasis, varicose veins and fleshy tumors. Struggling and wheezing as they navigate across the vast parking lot that leads to their gluttonous sanctuary, they seem to worship the very source of their disease.

Seven. Summarize both sides of a debate.

America is torn by the national healthcare debate. One camp says it's a crime that 25,000 Americans die unnecessarily each year from treatable disease and that, modeling a health system from other developed countries, is a moral imperative. However, there is another camp that fears that adopting some version of universal healthcare is tantamount to stepping into the direction of socialism.

Eight. State a misperception, fallacy, or error that your essay will refute.

Americans against universal or national healthcare are quick to say that such a system is "socialist," "communist," and "un-American," but a close look at their rhetoric shows that it is high on knee-jerk, mindless paroxysms and short on reality. Contrary to the enemies of national healthcare, providing universal coverage is very American and compatible with the American brand of capitalism.

Nine. Make a general statement about your topic.

From Sherry Turkle's essay "How Computers Change the Way We Think":

The tools we use to think change the ways in which we think. The invention of written language brought about a radical shift in how we process, organize, store, and transmit representations of the world. Although writing remains our primary information technology, today when we think about the impact of technology on our habits of mind, we think primarily of the computer.

Ten. Pose a question your essay will try to answer:

- *Why are diet books more and more popular, yet Americans are getting more and more fat?*
- *Why is psychotherapy becoming more and more popular, yet Americans are getting more and more crazy?*
- *Why are courses in the Humanities more essential to your wellbeing than you might think?*
- *What is the difference between thinking and critical thinking?*