

# WRITING A GOOD INTRODUCTION (PODCAST 15 TRANSCRIPT)

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Greetings everyone. This is Kurtis Clements with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to talk about writing a good introduction.

Writing a good introduction can be challenging, especially if you think about the fact that the opening of an essay is like a first impression—either it’s good or it’s not. The purpose of an introduction is to engage readers and to set the stage for what’s to follow in a piece of writing. Without an engaging introduction, you may very well lose your readers, and without an introduction that properly sets the stage—that is, an introduction that provides relevant background information and a sense of a focus—then readers will likely be lost, so taking the time to plan and compose a good introduction are essential.

Let’s start by talking about the characteristics of an effective introduction. A good introduction will provide relevant background information, engage the reader, set the appropriate tone, and establish the focus and purpose.

A good introduction provides relevant background information readers need to understand the discussion that follows. Regardless of the topic, readers need a context to understand your remarks so they understand the importance of the topic and why what you have to say about it matters. Readers want to feel grounded so that they can easily follow the development of the essay. If you are writing an essay that is a response to something you’ve read, then it stands to reason that you provide basic information about what you read in your introduction. It would be wise to include information such as the author, title, subject, and brief summary so that readers have a context for what you have to say about that content. If you don’t include such information in your introduction, readers will likely be lost. Right?

A good introduction will also capture the attention of readers so that they want to read the paragraphs beyond the introduction. In a sense, a good introduction reaches out and grabs readers by the shirt collars. If you present enough specific information, readers will likely be interested in the topic and/or what you have to say about it. An engaging introduction invites readers into the world of the writing.

Good introductions establish an appropriate tone for the discussion that follows. Keep in mind that your opening paragraph establishes the tone—the spirit and attitude behind your words and ideas in a piece of writing. The tone should be a conscious choice as it reflects how you feel about the subject and about the audience, as well as the degree of formality of the writing. In most academic writing, the general tone is formal, but it may be more or less formal depending on the exact purpose of the writing. For example, a piece of writing with the purpose of introducing a new employee will probably be less formal and more personable than, say, a persuasive essay. You need to think about



what you are trying to accomplish in the writing and your audience so that you use an appropriate tone.

Lastly, a good introduction establishes the focus and purpose. Many writers include a thesis statement that establishes the focus and purpose, and perhaps even forecasts the main points. Using a thesis is fine and it is typically placed at or near the end of the introduction. However, as you well know, not every essay needs a written-out thesis, and if this is the case, fine, but you need to make sure the focus and purpose of your essay are just as clear. If readers do not understand the focus or what you hope to accomplish, subsequent paragraphs may not make sense to readers. Right? Of course! Definitely keep this point in mind when composing your introduction.

Now let's talk about false starts and other missteps. Let me be candid. I have read far too many essays that begin with some incarnation of the following: "In this essay I am going to discuss." If you want to create a good first impression—and I know you do—please, please, please, please, please don't use a version of "In this essay I am going to discuss" to start your essay. In fact, you would be wise to avoid using that kind of phrasing anywhere in your introduction or essay.

I've also read a lot of introductions with language like this: When I read the assignment, I must admit I was challenged. I had no idea what I wanted to write about. I felt like crying but then...

Don't use language like this. Even though you are responding to an assignment prompt, you don't want your essay to sound that way. Imagine picking up *The New York Times* and reading an article that starts like this: My editor wanted me to write about the Occupy Wall Street protests, but I was a bit worried about my objectivity because back in the 60s I was a bit of a radical, but then I thought yadda yadda ya. Would you be interested in reading an article that started that way? I hope not. I know I wouldn't. What do you think the editor would say to this writer? How about: You're fired.

When you write an introduction, introduce the topic, not the context surrounding why you are writing about such a topic. Enough said.

There are other introductory missteps that I want to share—and encourage you to avoid in your own writing. Such missteps include essays that begin with language like "Since the beginning of time" or "The such and such issue has been debated for a very long time" or "Everyone has experiences that are both positive and negative." Please. Do you think this kind of phrasing will engage readers? It won't. It's the kind of language that is not even needed as it is stating the obvious.

There's no doubt that writing an introduction is a process and that over time a banal introduction becomes stellar. This is understood. My concern is that sometimes writers don't spend enough time on the introduction, thinking, perhaps, that only a perfunctory effort is needed. Not so. Introductions need special attention as they have a critical role in any piece of writing. Many folks ask: When should I write my introduction? And here's my answer: While you may write the introduction at any point in your process, you may find it easier to write the introduction after the paper is completed when you are more certain of what you want to say. That being said, it's also not a bad idea to work on an opening paragraph first if for no other reason than to interact with the subject and try to get the basic context and your thoughts into writing. Often while composing, you'll stumble upon content that triggers an idea for an introduction. Regardless of when you actually write the introduction, it will



likely change as you revise your paper and your focus and ideas get clearer and clearer.

With some careful thought and avoiding some common introductory false starts and missteps, you will be on your way to writing an effective introduction. In a future podcast, I will discuss introductory techniques, so be sure to look for that episode. Thanks for listening. Happy writing!

