

INTRODUCTION TECHNIQUES (PODCAST 36 TRANSCRIPT)

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Greetings everyone. This is Kurtis Clements with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to share with you techniques to use when writing an introduction.

Let's face it: Writing introductions can be tricky. Why? Well, for one, an introduction, for better or worse, is like a first impression. If the introduction is kind of wishy-washy and not that good, then the first impression readers have of the entire essay will likely not be too favorable. Second, writing an introduction can be tricky because many writers try to write the introduction first when the simple truth is it is often difficult—if not impossible—to write a good introduction if one hasn't even begun writing the paper. How can you properly introduce a subject if you are not sure exactly what you are going to say about the subject to begin with? For me—and I dare say for many writers—starting with some kind of introduction is necessary, but then later in the process the introduction gets revamped so that it properly and effectively introduces its subject to readers. Make sense?

Before I share some techniques, let me remind you that I discussed introductions in an earlier podcast—number 15 to be exact. In that podcast, I provided an overview of the role of an introduction in a composition, so you may want to listen to that podcast in conjunction with this podcast.

The first thing to keep in mind is that introductions set the stage for what is to follow in a piece of writing and are critical in preparing readers for the discussion. Without a proper introduction, readers may not be able to make sense of the content. An effective introduction does three things: It gets the reader interested with an enticing lead or hook, something that pulls the reader into the world of the essay; an introduction provides relevant background information readers need to understand the topic; and the introduction establishes the paper's focus and purpose, usually via a thesis statement.

Now let me share some strategies for writing introductions. Oftentimes an introduction will have characteristics of more than one approach, so you should treat this list as a compendium of possibilities, not as a prescription of how certain types of beginnings must look. A good approach to writing an introduction is to try out a number of options so that you get a sense of the possibilities. Don't feel locked into any one strategy and recognize that writing an introduction often requires a process just like the rest of your writing. To this end, don't feel you have to get the introduction right the first time. The more you work on your introduction and think about what you are trying to say in your paper as a whole, the better able you are going to be to write an effective introduction.

First technique: Establish the Issue. With this type of introduction, your approach is direct and



authoritative. You establish the topic, provide relevant background information so the context for your remarks is clear, and place the thesis.

Here's an example: In the last decade or so, American culture has become increasingly tolerant of teenage sexuality. Many parents, too busy in their lives, are not proactive in educating their teens on issues related to sexuality. Educators are often left with the role of providing basic information about the subject even as more and more sexual education classes are cut from the curriculum. Where does this leave curious teens? Statistics show that 75 percent of teens have had sex by the time they are nineteen years old. The teenage birth rate continues to climb as do reported cases of sexually transmitted diseases (Healy, 2008). Clearly, it is imperative to develop intervention programs that teach adolescents the effective skills in delaying early sexual behaviors. Early education on delaying sexual activity for teens can drastically decrease teenage pregnancies, prevent the spread of STDs, and help teens to make the right choices that can impact the rest of their lives.

Technique number two: Pose One or More Questions. This introduction is a tricky one to pull off, in large part because it is so common. The basic idea is to engage readers by using one or more thoughtful questions at the start. These questions need to move beyond the mundane and predictable so as to pique the audience's interest.

Here's an example: Did you ever think that your life would change dramatically in a matter of twenty-four hours? One day you have a certain kind of life – a home, nearby schools for your kids, a wonderful neighborhood, good job, friends – and the next day it was all gone, irreversibly changed. As a resident of New Orleans, Louisiana, I had always known that a major hurricane could strike, but even knowing this fact could not prepare me for what happened in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Hurricane Katrina demonstrated the need for residents to evacuate when mandated, for local and state authorities to work more efficiently together, and for the federal government to respond in a timely and responsible manner.

You can tell a **brief story or anecdote to begin an essay**, but the challenge for the writer with this kind of introduction is to make sure the narrative is clearly related to the focus of the essay—that is, the story has a purpose.

Example: It was a dark and stormy night. The wind whipped through the trees while lightening flashed and thunder boomed. Up ahead on a hill, a rickety old house stood. In an upstairs window, a single, solitary light shone, casting an eerie shadow across the yard. I was in Chattanooga, Tennessee, on business, and was driving to the outskirts of the city to visit my aunt, an old woman I hadn't seen in nearly twenty years. According to my directions, that rickety old house was my aunt's house, but I didn't know if I had the nerve to knock on the door. In fact, I couldn't remember a time I had been more scared. Everyone experiences fear just as everyone experiences happiness or sadness. Fear is a natural human emotion to the unknown and is characterized by physical changes to the body, an innate need to escape, and acute awareness of one's surroundings.

Next technique: Use an Attention-Grabbing Statement. This type of introduction presents an opening sentence that hooks readers immediately. The statement is provocative in some way and



readers want to continue reading to understand better the initial sentence.

Some children cannot sit still. They fidget and do not listen. They appear distracted by every little thing and do not seem to learn from their mistakes. These children disregard rules, even when they are punished repeatedly. Many people see such kids and conclude that their parents must not know how to control them. However, the truth is that attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is misunderstood. In fact, ADHD is a growing problem that requires more research to understand, better intervention programs to help afflicted children, and improved training and support programs to help parents and educators.

An introduction can include **an extended example or series of brief examples**. With this approach, you provide one or more examples that illustrate perfectly an important aspect of your topic. You will want to be careful not to use content that is too sensationalistic, yet at the same time, the examples should be vivid and memorable.

According to the Federal Highway and Transportation Agency, the majority of Americans, some 57%, do not regularly wear seat belts (2008). Teddy Biro didn't wear one when the car he was driving skidded on an icy road and hit a utility pole; Biro was catapulted through his front windshield and died of blood loss from a severed jugular vein. The coroner reported he had no other injuries besides minor abrasions. Bob Nettleblatt wasn't wearing a seatbelt when a car rear-ended him at a stop sign. Nettleblatt slammed his head into his front windshield and required 137 stitches to close up the laceration; investigators at the scene said if he had been wearing a seatbelt, he would have been virtually unhurt from the 2 mph rear end collision (Fischer, 2007). Despite what is known about the safety of wearing seatbelts, too many Americans still do not buckle up, resulting in enormous emergency medical costs and fatalities that could be avoided. Despite what some people think, wearing a seatbelt is not a choice nor does it violate one's personal rights. Wearing a seatbelt is the law and more needs to be done to enforce the law, punish those who break it, and educate young drivers to the dangers of not buckling up.

Here are some more good introductory approaches:

In some papers, the topic will be specialized enough that **one or more terms may need to be defined** so that readers can make sense of the discussion that follows. When defining a term, you should make sure the term is essential to the discussion and warrants a direct definition. In addition, you should define a term in your own words, not by consulting a dictionary. While referring to a dictionary may seem the logical approach, such definitions are predictable and usually boring. Offer a unique definition for any term that is important enough to require such attention. In the following example, note how the writer defines the term "criminal" in a way that is far more interesting than offering a dictionary definition.

Gun control legislation is ineffective because of the nature of criminals. A criminal is someone who disobeys the law and does not respect the rules of society. It is against the law to rob banks and murder people, but there are people in society who rob banks and murder people. Criminals do not obey the law regardless of the consequences. With this understanding of the basic nature of a



criminal, it seems obvious that gun control would not work at reducing crime because a criminal will not follow the law. Consider the Virginia Tech shootings in April of 2007. Seung-Hui Cho's murderous rampage took place in a gun-free zone (Brady, 2007), but as a criminal, he did not follow the law. If he respected the laws of this country, then this crime would never have occurred. It wouldn't have happened, not because of a gun-free zone, but because he understood murder was against the law. However, criminals do not obey laws—this is what makes them criminals.

Beginning in the middle of a scene with action underway is a terrific way to hook readers. The scene needs to be thoughtfully portrayed and compact so that it is appropriate for an academic essay, but this kind of opening can be very effective for some topics.

4 AM, March 28, 1979 and the floor of the control room at Three Mile Island nuclear power station jumps to life. The two control room operators are jolted from their mid-shift doldrums as alarms begin to sound and the pounding in the auxiliary room is deafening. What those at the station did not know was that the "worst crisis yet experienced by the nation's nuclear power industry" (Reuter, 2000, p. 31) had just begun, and its impact wouldn't be realized for years to come, if ever. Indeed, within seconds of the first alarm, a chain of events would commence to destroy the nuclear reactor and with it, the future of the nuclear power industry in this country.

As with the posing questions technique, **using a quote to start** can be effective, but it is also a familiar approach, so it does not come without risk. To this end, you will want to use a quote, whether direct or indirect, that is a zinger and worthy of the space and attention you give it.

An observer once said that New Orleanians are either having a party, recuperating from a party, or planning a party. The biggest and best party of all and the city's most famous celebration is Mardi Gras, the greatest free show on earth. Despite the image the popular media displays to outsiders, Mardi Gras is not the wild party shown on TV; in fact, Mardi Gras is a yearly celebration that is much tamer than most realize, brings family and friends together, and promotes unity among diverse groups of people.

Use a Shocking Statement or Shocking Statistic(s). This approach presents information that stops readers in their tracks. While the content is startling, it is also appropriate to the topic and provides an interesting context for the essay.

McDonald's has sold over 100 billion burgers. One hundred billion burgers with bun, stacked on top of one another would extend over 2.9 million miles into space—twelve times as far as the moon (Grimes, 2007). What is the secret of McDonald's incredible success? To use the words of Ray Kroc, McDonald's founder, the secret to McDonald's success is that the fast-food giant produces "consistently mediocre food" (Thomas, 2001, p. 67). The McDonald's corporation has become a model of success due to its understanding of its market niche, its ability to redefine its image over time, and its ability to remain stable and produce a profit even in difficult economic times.

Let these techniques serve as possible approaches to use when it comes time to write your own introductions. Don't feel locked into using any one strategy as you can combine techniques if that's what it takes to make the introduction work. The best advice I can offer is to experiment with these



approaches—that is, try out multiple techniques until you find one that really seems to do the job. And don't be afraid to write your introduction later in the writing process or revise the one you started with to something new. Make your essay's first impression count!

Thanks everyone for listening. Good luck with your introductions! Happy writing!

