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Tips on Writing an Introductory Paragraph

WOW!

ZAP!

POWIE!

These are *great* attention grabbers and probably did catch your eye--the first assignment of the introductory paragraph--but these openers are not really acceptable for a college essay. They do not properly address the kind of audience you have, nor do they bring up your topic under discussion, which is the second task of the introductory paragraph. In *The Bedford Handbook for Writers*, Diane Hacker suggests writing the introduction last after you know what your paper finally says. That way, you are writing an introduction to a paper you have written, instead of one you hope to write. Because students sometimes have difficulty with them, even then, what follows is a discussion of a few approaches that may assist you in writing an effective introduction. Please first consult your instructor for any guidelines he or she has.

Direct Opener: With this approach, you begin with a statement of your topic, and then continue with enough information that will lead you to the thesis statement. Note the following example.

When I was sixteen, I married and moved to a small town to live. [See the topic?] My new husband nervously showed me the house he had rented. It was after dark when we arrived there, and I remember wondering why he seemed so apprehensive about my reaction to the house. I thought the place seemed shabby but potentially cozy and quite livable inside. The morning sun revealed the reason for his anxiety by exposing the squalor outdoors. Up to that point, my contact with any reality but that of my own middle-class childhood had come from books. The next four years in a small Iowa town taught me that reading about poverty is a lot different from living with it.*

Indirect Openers: These allow you the opportunity to familiarize or even surprise your reader.

ILLUSTRATING: Using examples, you familiarize your reader with the topic.

Cartoonist Gary Larson drew a "boneless chicken farm" with chickens draped on stones, fences and the ground, as if they were rags and not fowl. A chicken without bones is just not a chicken. A human without a skeleton can't survive. A building without beams and girders is just a pile of rubble. So, too, each piece you write needs some *structure* to keep you and your reader focused and secure. You create the structure of what you write by *organizing*.**

DEFINING: This opening approach defines, or *limits*, a word, topic or idea. It creates a common understanding with your reader.

Active euthanasia of animals is a legal and accepted practice. *It is helping an animal to die by administering certain drugs.* As the technician in an animal hospital, it is also the hardest part of my job. Sometimes I know it is justifiable to put an animal to sleep because it is suffering and is being put out of misery, but other times I think it is a waste of a life.*

SURPRISING WITH STATISTICS: An unexpected or shocking statistic related to your topic can be used to grab your reader's attention.

This year over 40% of the homeless are under the age of eleven. Of these children, 30% will not reach the age of eighteen, and 70% will have had experiences with drugs and prostitution. Americans can actively help alleviate these horrible conditions by advocating children's rights.**

OFFERING HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: While this method focuses on providing historical data to put the topic in context for the reader, it can also be used to give non-historical, though pertinent, background information.

In ancient Greece when a child was born with a deformity or if the child was an excess female, the child would be placed on a mountaintop to die. Throughout history, children have been forced to do work that even adults found difficult. Child abuse, in some countries, has been considered to be the best way to discipline the child. It is only in this century that we are coming to understand the need to legally protect children's rights.**

In considering the choices you have in beginning your essay, you will also want to be aware of some strategies writers usually avoid.

- Avoid beginning with commonly-known information. Such an introduction does not "catch" the reader's attention.
- Avoid declaring what you are planning to do in the essay--"I am going to explain . . .", "This paper will address . . .", etc. Since it is your paper, obviously *you* will be explaining, or addressing, etc.
- Avoid committing to a plan you cannot accomplish. Do not ask questions, for example, that you do not answer, or use tricks like withholding certain information that you will reveal later.***

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*Hacker, Diana. The Bedford Handbook for Writers. Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1991.

**Rich, Susanna. The Flexible Writer, 3rd ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998.

***Daikler, Kerek, et al. The Writer's Options, 4th ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.