

INTRODUCTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS: How we Finish and What we Started

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INTRODUCTIONS

The role of introductions

Introductions and conclusions can be the most difficult parts of papers to write. Usually when you sit down to respond to an assignment, you have at least some sense of what you want to say in the body of your paper. You might have chosen a few examples you want to use or have an idea that will help you answer the main question of your assignment: these sections, therefore, are not as hard to write. But these middle parts of the paper can't just come out of thin air; they need to be introduced and concluded in a way that makes sense to your reader.

Strategies for writing an effective introduction

Start by thinking about the question (or questions) you are trying to answer. Your entire essay will be a response to this question, and your introduction is the first step toward that end. Your direct answer to the assigned question will be your thesis, and your thesis will be included in your introduction, so it is a good idea to use the question as a jumping off point. Imagine that you are assigned the following question:

Education has long been considered a major force for American social change, righting the wrongs of our society. Drawing on the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, discuss the relationship between education and slavery in 19th-century America. Consider the following: How did white control of education reinforce slavery? How did Douglass and other enslaved African Americans view education while they endured slavery? And what role did education play in the acquisition of freedom? Most importantly, consider the degree to which education was or was not a major force for social change with regard to slavery.

You will probably refer back to your assignment extensively as you prepare your complete essay, and the prompt itself can also give you some clues about how to approach the introduction. Notice that it starts with a broad statement, that education has been considered a major force for social change, and then narrows to focus on specific questions from the book. One strategy might be to use a similar model in your own introduction —start off with a big picture sentence or two about the power of education as a force for change as a way of getting your reader interested and then focus in on the details of your argument about Douglass. Of course, a different approach could also be very successful, but looking at the way the professor set up the question can sometimes give you some ideas for how you might answer it.

Decide how general or broad your opening should be. Keep in mind that even a “big picture” opening needs to be clearly related to your topic; an opening sentence that said “Human beings, more than any other creatures on earth, are capable of learning” would be too broad for our sample assignment about slavery and education. If you have ever used Google Maps or similar programs, that experience can provide a helpful way of thinking about how broad your opening should be. When writing, you need to place your ideas in context—but that context doesn’t generally have to be as big as the whole galaxy!

Try writing your introduction last. You may think that you have to write your introduction first, but that isn’t necessarily true, and it isn’t always the most effective way to craft a good introduction. You may find that you don’t know what you are going to argue at the beginning of the writing process, and only through the experience of writing your paper do you discover your main argument. It is perfectly fine to start out thinking that you want to argue a particular point, but wind up arguing something slightly or even dramatically different by the time you’ve written most of the paper. The writing process can be an important way to organize your ideas, think through complicated issues, refine your thoughts, and develop a sophisticated argument. However, an introduction written at the beginning of that discovery process will not necessarily reflect what you wind up with at the end. You will need to revise your paper to make sure that the introduction, all of the evidence, and the conclusion reflect the argument you intend. Sometimes it’s easiest to just write up all of your evidence first and then write the introduction last—that way you can be sure that the introduction will match the body of the paper.

Don’t be afraid to write a tentative introduction first and then change it later. Some people find that they need to write some kind of introduction in order to get the writing process started. That’s fine, but if you are one of those people, be sure to return to your initial introduction later and rewrite if necessary.

Open with an attention grabber. Sometimes, especially if the topic of your paper is somewhat dry or technical, opening with something catchy can help. Consider these options:

1. **an intriguing example** (for example, the mistress who initially teaches Douglass but then ceases her instruction as she learns more about slavery)
2. **a provocative quotation** (Douglass writes that “education and slavery were incompatible with each other”)
3. **a puzzling scenario** (Frederick Douglass says of slaves that “[N]othing has been left undone to cripple their intellects, darken their minds, debase their moral nature, obliterate all traces of their relationship to mankind; and yet how wonderfully they have sustained the mighty load of a most frightful bondage, under which they have been groaning for centuries!” Douglass clearly asserts that slave owners went to great lengths to destroy the mental capacities of slaves, yet his own life story proves that these efforts could be unsuccessful.)
4. **a vivid and perhaps unexpected anecdote** (for example, “Learning about slavery in the American history course at Frederick Douglass High School, students studied the work slaves did, the impact of slavery on their families, and the rules that governed their lives. We didn’t discuss education, however, until one student, Mary, raised her hand and asked, ‘But when did they go to school?’ That modern high school students could not conceive of an American childhood devoid of formal education speaks volumes about the centrality of education to American youth today and also suggests the significance of the deprivation of education in past generations.”)

5. **a thought-provoking question** (given all of the freedoms that were denied enslaved individuals in the American South, why does Frederick Douglass focus his attentions so squarely on education and literacy?)

Pay special attention to your first sentence. Start off on the right foot with your readers by making sure that the first sentence actually says something useful and that it does so in an interesting and error-free way.

Be straightforward and confident. Avoid statements like “In this paper, I will argue that Frederick Douglass valued education.” While this sentence points toward your main argument, it isn’t especially interesting. It might be more effective to say what you mean in a declarative sentence. It is much more convincing to tell us that “Frederick Douglass valued education” than to tell us that you are going to say that he did. Assert your main argument confidently. After all, you can’t expect your reader to believe it if it doesn’t sound like you believe it!

How to evaluate your introduction draft

Ask a friend to read it and then tell you what he or she expects the paper will discuss, what kinds of evidence the paper will use, and what the tone of the paper will be. If your friend is able to predict the rest of your paper accurately, you probably have a good introduction.

Five kinds of less effective introductions

1. The place holder or filler introduction. When you don’t have much to say on a given topic, it is easy to create this kind of introduction. Essentially, this kind of weaker introduction contains several sentences that are vague and don’t really say much. They exist just to take up the “introduction space” in your paper. If you had something more effective to say, you would probably say it, but in the meantime this paragraph is just a place holder or filler for the introduction.

Example: Slavery was one of the greatest tragedies in American history. There were many different aspects of slavery. Each created different kinds of problems for enslaved people.

2. The restated question introduction. Restating the question can sometimes be an effective strategy, but it can be easy to stop at JUST restating the question instead of offering a more specific, interesting introduction to your paper. The professor or teaching assistant wrote your questions and will be reading ten to seventy essays in response to them—he or she does not need to read a whole paragraph that simply restates the question. Try to do something more interesting.

Example: Indeed, education has long been considered a major force for American social change, righting the wrongs of our society. The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass discusses the relationship between education and slavery in 19th century America, showing how white control of education reinforced slavery and how Douglass and other enslaved African Americans viewed education while they endured. Moreover, the book discusses the role that education played in the acquisition of freedom. Education was a major force for social change with regard to slavery.

3. The Webster’s Dictionary introduction. This introduction begins by giving the dictionary definition of one or more of the words in the assigned question or research question. This introduction strategy is on the right track—if you write one of these, you may be trying to establish the important terms of the discussion, and this move builds a bridge to the reader by offering a common, agreed-upon definition for a key idea. You may also be looking for an authority that will lend credibility to your paper. However, anyone can look a word up in the dictionary and copy down what Webster says—it may be far more interesting for you (and your reader) if you develop your own definition of the term in the specific context of your class, assignment, or project, or if you use a definition from one of the sources you’ve been reading in the relevant literature. Also recognize that the dictionary is also not a particularly authoritative work—it doesn’t take into account the context of your course, the focus of the academic literature, and doesn’t offer particularly detailed information. If you feel that you must seek out an authority, try to find one that is very relevant and specific to your research topic and question. Perhaps a quotation from an academic source might prove better? Dictionary introductions are also ineffective simply because they are so overused.

Example: Webster’s dictionary defines slavery as “the state of being a slave,” as “the practice of owning slaves,” and as “a condition of hard work and subjection.”

4. The “dawn of man” introduction. This kind of introduction generally makes broad, sweeping statements about the relevance of this topic since the beginning of time. It is usually very general (similar to the place holder introduction) and fails to connect to the thesis. You may write this kind of introduction when you don’t have much to say—which is precisely why it is ineffective.

Example: Since the dawn of man, slavery has been a problem in human history.

5. The book report introduction. This introduction is what you had to do for your elementary school book reports. It gives the name and author of the book you are writing about, tells what the book is about, and offers other basic facts about the book. You might resort to this sort of introduction when you are trying to fill space because it’s a familiar, comfortable format. It is ineffective because it offers details that your reader already knows and that are irrelevant to the thesis.

Example: Frederick Douglass wrote his autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, in the 1840s. It was published in 1986 by Penguin Books. In it, he tells the story of his life.

CONCLUSIONS

Introductions and conclusions can be the most difficult parts of papers to write. While the body is often easier to write, it needs a frame around it. An introduction and conclusion frame your thoughts and bridge your ideas for the reader.

A conclusion will help the reader why all your analysis and information should matter after they put the paper down.

Your conclusion is your chance to have the last word on the subject. The conclusion allows you to have the final say on the issues you have raised in your paper, to summarize your thoughts, to demonstrate the importance of your ideas, and to propel your reader to a new view of the subject. It is also your opportunity to make a good final impression and to end on a positive note.

The conclusion may push beyond the specific research question or findings of your analyses to consider broader issues, make new connections, and elaborate on the significance of your findings.

Your conclusion should make your readers glad they read your paper. Your conclusion gives your reader something to take away that will help them see things differently or appreciate your topic in personally relevant ways. It can suggest broader implications that will not only interest your reader, but also enrich your reader's life in some way. It is your gift to the reader.

Strategies for writing an effective conclusion

One or more of the following strategies may help you write an effective conclusion.

- **Play the “So What” Game.** If you're stuck and feel like your conclusion isn't saying anything new or interesting, ask a friend to read it with you. Whenever you make a statement from your conclusion, ask the friend to say, “So what?” or “Why should anybody care?” Then ponder that question and answer it. Here's how it might go:

You: *Basically, I'm just saying that education was important to Douglass.*

Friend: *So what?*

You: *Well, it was important because it was a key to him feeling like a free and equal citizen.*

Friend: *Why should anybody care?*

You: *That's important because plantation owners tried to keep slaves from being educated so that they could maintain control. When Douglass obtained an education, he undermined that control personally.*

You can also use this strategy on your own, asking yourself “So What?” as you develop your ideas or your draft.

- **Return to the theme or themes in the introduction.** This strategy brings the reader full circle. For example, if you begin by describing a scenario, you can end with the same scenario as proof that your essay is helpful in creating a new understanding. You may also refer to the introductory paragraph by using key words or parallel concepts and images that you also used in the introduction. Or start the conclusions by saying something like: The purpose of this paper was.... or This paper set out to address the following question...
- **Synthesize, don't summarize:** Include a brief summary of the paper's main points, but don't simply repeat things that were in your paper. Instead, show your reader how the points you made and the support and examples you used fit together. Pull it all together.
- **Include a provocative insight** or quotation from the research or reading you did for your paper.
- **Propose a course of action, a solution to an issue, or questions for further study.** This can redirect your reader's thought process and help her to apply your info and ideas to her own life or to see the broader implications.
- **Point to broader implications.** For example, if your paper examines the Greensboro sit-ins or another event in the Civil Rights Movement, you could point out its impact on the Civil Rights Movement as a whole. A paper about the style of writer Virginia Woolf could point to her influence on other writers or on later feminists.

Strategies to avoid

- Beginning with an unnecessary, overused phrase such as "in conclusion," "in summary," or "in closing." Although these phrases can work in speeches, they come across as wooden and trite in writing.
- Stating the thesis for the very first time in the conclusion.
- Introducing a new idea or subtopic in your conclusion.
- Ending with a rephrased thesis statement without any substantive changes.
- Making sentimental, emotional appeals that are out of character with the rest of an analytical paper.
- Including evidence (quotations, statistics, etc.) that should be in the body of the paper.

Four kinds of ineffective conclusions

1. **The "That's My Story and I'm Sticking to It" Conclusion.** This conclusion just restates the thesis and is usually painfully short. It does not push the ideas forward. People write this kind of conclusion when they can't think of anything else to say. Example: In conclusion, Frederick Douglass was, as we have seen, a pioneer in American education, proving that education was a major force for social change with regard to slavery.
2. **The "Sherlock Holmes" Conclusion.** Sometimes writers will state the thesis or research question for the very first time in the conclusion. You might be tempted to use this strategy if you don't want to give everything away too early in your paper. You may think it would be more dramatic to keep the reader in the dark until the end and then "wow" him with your main idea, as in a Sherlock Holmes mystery. The reader, however, does not expect a mystery, but an analytical discussion of your topic in an academic style, with the main argument (thesis) stated up front. Example: (After a paper that lists numerous incidents from the book but never says what these incidents reveal about Douglass and his views on education): So, as the evidence above

demonstrates, Douglass saw education as a way to undermine the slaveholders' power and also an important step toward freedom.

3. **The “America the Beautiful”/”I Am Woman”/”We Shall Overcome” Conclusion.** This kind of conclusion usually draws on emotion to make its appeal, but while this emotion and even sentimentality may be very heartfelt, it is usually out of character with the rest of an analytical paper. A more sophisticated commentary, rather than emotional praise, would be a more fitting tribute to the topic. Example: Because of the efforts of fine Americans like Frederick Douglass, countless others have seen the shining beacon of light that is education. His example was a torch that lit the way for others. Frederick Douglass was truly an American hero.
4. **The “Grab Bag” Conclusion.** This kind of conclusion includes extra information that the writer found or thought of but couldn't integrate into the main paper. You may find it hard to leave out details that you discovered after hours of research and thought, but adding random facts and bits of evidence at the end of an otherwise-well-organized essay can just create confusion. Example: In addition to being an educational pioneer, Frederick Douglass provides an interesting case study for masculinity in the American South. He also offers historians an interesting glimpse into slave resistance when he confronts Covey, the overseer. His relationships with female relatives reveal the importance of family in the slave community.

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, edited and with introduction by Houston A. Baker, Jr., New York: Penguin Books, 1986.

Strategies for Writing a Conclusion. Literacy Education Online, St. Cloud State University. 18 May 2005 <<http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/acadwrite/conclude.html>>.

Conclusions. Nesbitt-Johnston Writing Center, Hamilton College. 17 May 2005 <<http://www.hamilton.edu/academic/Resource/WC/SampleConclusions.html>>.

RESOURCES FOR WRITERS: INTRODUCTION STRATEGIES
Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies, MIT
<http://writing.mit.edu/wcc/resources/writers/introduction>

Introduction Strategies

Excluding scientific and technical writing (which often has pre-established formats), most other topics lend themselves to a variety of introductory gambits. Suppose the assignment is to write a literary analysis of Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*. Below are several different ways to start that essay. Please note that not all introductions would be appropriate for one particular thesis or approach. But having a repertoire of openings at our disposal often helps lead us to insights we didn't know we had.

Begin with a quotation

Although this approach can be overused, it can be very effective when you have an appropriate quotation. That quotation may relate directly to the subject or it may be only indirectly related (and thus require further explanation). Do not force a quotation into this spot; if an appropriate quotation is not available, select another method.

- "The novel *Lolita*," the critic Charles Blight said in 1959, "is proof that American civilization is on the verge of total moral collapse" (45). The judgment of critics and readers in subsequent years, however, has proclaimed *Lolita* to be one of the great love stories of all time and one of the best proofs that American civilization is still vibrant and alive.
- "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul" (11). These opening lines of *Lolita* reveal the essence of Humbert's complexity and compulsion, his saving grace and his damning passion.

Begin with a concession

Start with a statement recognizing an opinion or approach different from the one you plan to take in your essay.

- Many critics have pointed to the unrelenting word games and puns throughout *Lolita* as proof that Vladimir Nabokov's major concern has always been language and art. Although these subjects certainly loom in all his works, a close examination of *Lolita* reveals that morality -- the way people treat each other -- is just as major a concern for him as language and art.

Begin with a paradox

A paradox is a seeming self contradiction.

- By 1959 Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* had been banned in several cities as pornographic. Today it is required reading not only in literature courses but also in philosophy courses that explore the nature of love. Since its publication, the novel's subject has been recognized to be love, not lust; art, not perversion.

Begin with a short anecdote or narrative

- When the original movie version of *Lolita* was released in the early 1960s, Sue Lyon, the young actress who starred as the provocative "nymphet" of the title, was judged too young to be allowed to see the movie in the theater.

Begin with an interesting fact or statistic

- Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov -- two acknowledged masters of English prose -- were not even native speakers of English. Conrad's native tongue was Polish; Nabokov's, Russian.

Begin with a question or several questions that will be answered in the paper

- How could a book now acknowledged as a masterpiece not only of fiction but also of English prose have been banned when it was published? How could a novel that dealt with love and art be thought of as pornographic? Why would a society so mindful of free speech as America ban any book in the first place?

Begin with relevant background material

Background material should be presented concisely and should be clearly related to your thesis. A rambling discussion of material only remotely related to your main point will confuse and bore your readers.

- Although he was born in Russia and lived for many years in England, Germany, and France before coming to America in 1941, Vladimir Nabokov is now considered one of the great American novelists of the 20th century. This opinion, however, is not based solely on his mastery of English prose. His novel *Lolita* has been said to have captured the essence of American life in the 1950s better than any novel written by a writer born in this country.

Begin by stating a long-term effect or effects without immediately stating the cause

- It caused howls of protest from the guardians of public morality in the 1950s. Indirectly it helped bring about both artistic and personal freedom in the 1960s. Today it is a recognized classic of art and thought -- Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*.

Begin with an analogy

- Like a hurricane that brings fear and panic along with its powerful winds, uprooting trees and disrupting belief in an all-merciful God, so the novel *Lolita* swept across America in the 1950s, bringing fear and panic that pedophilia would be loosed on the land. Instead, the novel, like a hurricane, blew over trees of thought that were not deeply rooted in American experience, exposing their gnarled premises while helping to clear the way for the artistic freedom of the 1960s.

Begin with a definition of a term that is important to your essay

Avoid simple dictionary definitions. Create an expanded definition that explains how the term applies to your topic and essay.

- Every few years the ugly charge of "pornography" is aimed at some novel or movie. Never was the term more inappropriately used than in the case of *Lolita*, yet the taint of that word still lingers in the minds of many when they hear the book's title. What exactly is "pornography" that it should stir such feelings and be so hated? The problem, of course, is that no one can agree on what pornography actually is. That it has something to do with sex seems clear; beyond that, there is a chaos of opinion. When the small-minded or special-interest definitions are pushed aside, however, we are left with D.H. Lawrence's provocative definition: pornography is anything that "does dirt on sex." By that definition, *Lolita* is the opposite of pornography -- it is a celebration of sex and love.