

Writing introductions

An introduction should tell your reader exactly what your paper is about and how it is structured.

Introductions are usually 5-10% of the length of an a typical essay. Readers gain their first impressions of a paper from this section, so an effective introduction is vital.

Generally, introductions begin with some brief **background** or **contextual information** that provides a focus for your paper.

This should be followed by a clear articulation of your controlling argument or point of view - a sentence that is sometimes called a **thesis statement**. The thesis statement must directly and clearly respond to the set question or topic and can sometimes be indicated by phrases such as; “*This paper will argue that ...*” or “*This essay will advance the idea that ...*”

Next, an **overview** of **how** you will support your argument should be presented, with a clear preview of the order in which you will proceed; this process can be indicated by such phrases as “*In order to explore these issues, this paper will first...*”; “*This will be followed by ...*”; “*The paper will conclude with...*” etc.

The introduction should also clarify how you intend to **interpret** or **limit** the question. You may also need to **define key terms**, or theoretical approaches.

Do not ‘pad’ your introduction with too much detail or references from other sources, rather, relate this section *directly* to the set question or topic. It can be useful to incorporate some of the actual words of the question into your introduction.

The introduction should tell your reader:

- How you understand the topic (e.g. context, background, key terms)
- What your controlling argument is
- What issues you will cover (and in which order)
- Highlight ideas as major or minor (for longer essays)
- What conclusion you will reach

Writing an essay is not like writing a mystery novel with an unfolding plot. Aim to be transparent and direct. Your reader should not have to read several pages before finding out what your argument or thesis is; it needs to be in the introduction.

Following is an example of an introduction with its key aspects identified in the text boxes.

Question (from Arts): *To what extent can the American Revolution be understood as a revolution ‘from below’? Why did working people become involved and with what aims in mind?*

Historians generally concentrate on the twenty year period between 1763 and 1783 as the period which constitutes the American Revolution. However, when considering the involvement of working people, or people from below, in the revolution it is important to make a distinction between the pre- revolutionary period 1763-1774 and the revolution of 1774- 1788 , marked by the establishment of the continental Congress (1). This paper will argue that the nature and aims of the actions of working people are difficult to assess as it changed according to each phase. The pre-revolutionary period was characterised by opposition to Britain’s authority. During this period the aims and actions of the working people were more conservative as they responded to grievances related to taxes and scarce land, issues which directly affected them. However, examination of activities such as the organisation of crowd action and town meetings, pamphlet writing, formal communications to Britain of American grievances and physical action in the streets, demonstrates that their aims and actions became more revolutionary after 1775.

Sets general context of the period

How the key term ‘from below’ is interpreted

Thesis statement
or statement of argument

Indication of conclusion

Elaboration on content of essay

