

# Essay Introductions

The introduction establishes the topic area, provides any necessary definitions, qualifies the range of the argument, and, most importantly, states the **thesis** of the paper. The introduction is also the first contact the audience has with the argument; it is, therefore, the first and perhaps the most important place to win an attentive and sympathetic reading.

An introduction is not, however, the first part of the paper to be composed. Because it reflects the *whole accomplishment* of a paper, it can be written only when the research and argument are complete. Never let the problem of composing an introduction delay work on a paper. Once a paper is complete, the introduction will almost write itself. Only the **thesis statement** demands attention in the early stages of composition.

The most important part of an essay is the thesis statement. Plain exposition scarcely requires a thesis, but for argumentative writing (this includes all critical papers) a strong statement of purpose is essential. Without a clear thesis, an essay will wander, and so will the readers' attention. A dull thesis will bore readers:

**Pets are a source of joy to all.**

An obscure or pretentious one will confuse them:

**In clinical terms, the pet-owner relationship can be viewed from many angles.**

Worst of all is the thesis that undermines itself:

**This essay will be about pets.**

This is not a thesis at all but a vague promise. Such statements are unnecessary, for the reader already knows that the work is an essay and that it will be about something. "About pets" only causes the reader to ask, "WHAT about pets?" While this statement does not reveal explicitly what the essay is about, an experienced reader will guess, very shrewdly, that it will be about nothing at all. Another way of undermining a thesis is by drawing attention to the weakest element of an essay: the writer.

**In my opinion, pets are a source of joy.**

This is unnecessary: the reader knows that the opinions expressed are the writer's. Moreover, "In my opinion" sounds like an apology, and this makes a weak opening.

Narrowing a general topic down to a viable thesis is not always easy. The following table provides examples of general topics and how they could be transformed into real, vital theses. Look closely at these models, and be certain you understand the difference between announcing a subject and stating a thesis.

| Subject        | General Topic                     | Restricted  | Thesis   | Purpose               |
|----------------|-----------------------------------|---|--|-----------------------|
| nuclear waste  | disposal of nuclear waste         | ocean dumping of waste from fission reactors                | "Despite their denials, the management of the Windrush nuclear facility understood the environmental risks of ocean dumping as early as 1965." | Attributing guilt     |
| transportation | decline in rail passenger service | CN cutbacks in passenger service in Eastern Canada          | "The loss of CN's daily cross-Canada passenger service has doomed public transportation in New Brunswick."                                     | Predicting an outcome |
| forestry       | Canadian softwood tree harvest    | Effects of market forces on New Brunswick forest management | "Attempts at forest management in New Brunswick have failed because of the irresistible influence of the booming U.S. pulp market."            | Determining cause     |

Like the introduction as a whole, the thesis is placed at the beginning of the paper but composed at the end of the project. The thesis guides readers through the paper: Readers want to know where they are going, and nothing gives them a clearer idea of the purpose of each stage of the argument than an explicit thesis statement. In a long work, one in which the introduction is several paragraphs or even several pages long, you may defer stating your thesis for some time; in short papers it belongs at the start of a paper.

In either case, the thesis statement is both the *first* and the *last* element you work on. In the early stages, you propose a **provisional** or **working thesis**; when the paper is complete you must return to that statement and revise it, ensuring that it represents your entire accomplishment.