

INTRODUCTIONS, CONCLUSIONS, PARAGRAPHS

Introduction

If you introduce two people, you make it possible for them to relate to each other and to begin a conversation. Likewise, an introduction to a paper should explain and contextualize the topic; it should also render the topic interesting and relevant. You may introduce your paper by

- asking a question (which the main body of the paper will answer);
- defining a problem (which the main body of the paper will solve);
- presenting a thesis (which the main body of the paper will substantiate with evidence and arguments);
- summarizing the claims of other critics (which the main body of the paper will refute, qualify or extend);
- contextualizing your topic by zooming in on it from a more general focus;
- a combination of these.

Avoid:

- general remarks about the author or the period that are not related to your topic;
- plot summaries;
- a naked statement of what you are going to do (i.e. your contents page rephrased in complete sentences); you may include this if your argument is a complicated one, but in a well-structured paper with a good contents page this should be superfluous.

Conclusion

While an introduction is indispensable, a separate conclusion may not be necessary. You may conclude your paper by

- taking the final step in your argument (if the argument is a progressive one with a first and final step, which may or may not be the case);
- delivering the best point;
- looking beyond the argument (this is risky).

Avoid giving a mere summary of your paper. If you feel the need to summarize, then be honest and call the final section a summary, not a conclusion.

Paragraph Structure

A good paragraph is a sense unit with a coherent structure. The following paragraph is both a comment on and an illustration of how a paragraph should be structured:

... in this respect, introducing your topic is not unlike introducing a person.

(1) While a good introduction is important, well-structured paragraphs are even more so. (2) Ideally, a paragraph contains the following elements in the following order: a transition from the previous paragraph, a topic sentence, and the so-called development. (3) The transition connects the previous paragraph and the new one; it may consist in a separate clause, but it may also be combined with the topic sentence. The topic sentence indicates the main idea of the paragraph. As a rule, it will be the first or second sentence in the paragraph; but it may also be placed in the middle or at the end. While the topic sentence expresses the main idea in an abstract manner, the development fleshes it out in a more concrete fashion, providing examples, definitions or clarifications. For instance, if your topic sentence claims that the style of the poem is colloquial, then you should quote a few examples such as “kids”, “chap” or “booze” in your development to illustrate your claim.

(1) transition from previous paragraph

(2) topic sentence

(3) development (here, by way of definition and example)