

Introductions: Why and How for Humanities Papers

What is the purpose of an introduction in the Humanities field?

- An introduction is often compared to a funnel which narrows down to the thesis statement. Sometimes it provides a road map to the paper or situates the reader. It gives the reader a first impression of the paper and often tells the reader what question or issue the paper is attempting to resolve and/or negotiate.
- Sometimes, but not often, an introduction can be more than one paragraph. It is especially important to have a strong thesis when an introduction runs longer than one paragraph.

An ideal introduction will incorporate some or all of these goals:

- define the topic (issue, question, or problem) and why it matters
- show method of approach to topic
- provide necessary background information or context
- state the thesis the paper will develop

Some Possible Ways to Begin:

- Begin with questions that will be answered.
- Contrast two different views/aspects of a topic.
- Describe an experience related to the topic.
- Start with a narrative to set the scene.
- Begin with a relevant quote.
- Give a brief summary of the text or event.

How much information should I give up front?

Ask yourself:

- How much can I assume my readers know about my subject?
- Which parts of the research and/or the background are important enough to include in an introduction?
- Should I present an “open thesis,” which tells my reader only my position on a topic, or a “closed thesis,” which tells my reader both my position and the reason why?
- Which are essential parts of my plan or road map to include?

Three ways to know if you are doing too much in the introduction.

- 1) Are you digressing?
 - providing too much background
 - starting at a point too far away from the paper’s immediate concerns, ex. “Since the beginning of time...”
 - assuming your readers know nothing about the subject

2) Is the introduction incoherent?

- trying to preview too much of the paper’s conclusion before points are laid out
- making few or no connections between sentences
- covering too many areas at once

3) Are you prejudging?

- appearing to have already settled the question posed in your paper

Sample Introduction*:

On April 23, 1994, as Barbara Schoener was jogging in the Sierra foothills of California, she was pounced on from behind by a mountain lion. After an apparent struggle with her attacker, Schoener was killed by bites to her neck and head (Rychnovsky 39). In 1996, because of Schoener’s death and other highly publicized attacks, California politicians presented voters with Proposition 197, which contained provisions repealing much of a 1990 law enacted to protect the lions. The 1990 law outlawed sport hunting of mountain lions and even prevented the Department of Fish and Game from thinning the lion population.

Proposition 197 was rejected by a large margin, probably because the debate turned into a struggle between hunting and antihunting factions. When California politicians revisit the mountain lion question, they should frame the issue in a new way. A future proposition should retain the ban on sport hunting but allow the Department of Fish and Game to control the population. Wildlife management would reduce the number of lion attacks on humans and in the long run would also protect the lions.

What this sample introduction does right:

It moves from the general to the specific. It defines the topic and why it matters. It provides the necessary background information or context using a narrative to provide context for the relevant facts to the thesis. The thesis asserts the main point.

*Sample introduction taken from:

Hacker, Diana. *Rules for Writers*. 4th ed. Boston: Bedford/St Martins, 2001.

Work Consulted:

Rosenwasser, David and Jill Stephen. *Writing Analytically*. 3rd ed. Boston: Heinle, 2003.

Introductions: Why and How for Scientific Papers

What is the purpose of an introduction in the scientific field?

- An introduction sets up the question or issue to be resolved or studied. It provides the necessary background information for a reader to follow and understand the importance of the topic/study (i.e. why research should be done). An introduction orients the reader to the problem at hand.

An ideal scientific introduction will do these things:

- provide the research context for the problem/question being addressed
- state and explain the problem/issue in specific terms; how this part will fill in the missing brick in the wall of research already done
- give some sense of the paper's overall organization
- how and why this research is important

How much information should you give up front?

Ask yourself:

- What background information is necessary to understand the question/issue you will explore?
- How much information is necessary to understand the importance of this question/issue?
- Are you demonstrating an understanding of the issues?
- Have you clearly focused on one specific question/issue?
- Are you assimilating or synthesizing the background information as a frame for your own observations/ideas?

How do you know if you are doing too much or not enough?

- 1) Are you taking too broad an approach?
 - You want to orient the reader to the specific question/issue the paper discusses, not the entire history of the field. Avoid the "Since the dawn of man" introduction.
- 2) Are you taking too narrow an approach?
 - You want to assume the reader knows something about the field, but do not assume the reader is an expert. The reader/audience does not know everything the writer does.

Checklist for prewriting and revising introductions to scientific papers:

Ask yourself:

- What am I trying to discover or prove?
- Which kind of problem am I working on? (define or measure, match facts and theory, evaluate and compare, or prove one thing over another)
- What, how, who, when, where, and why?
- Why is this problem new or distinctive?

- Am I including quotations where I should be summarizing and synthesizing the source information using few or no quotations?

Consider if you have done the following:

- Explained the theory or model.
- Related the problem to theory.
- Described the facts that are already known that support or don't fit the theory (background information). Explained why this does or does not match up.
- Stated the problem in specific terms.
- Included non-scientific evidence or sources only when vital to the question/issue or when assigned or given permission by the teacher.

Sample Introduction*:

In most ecosystems, the supply of nitrogen is the most limiting factor to plant growth. Nitrogen is available to plants only after it has been fixed into NH_4^+ or NO_3^- compounds which make up a very small percentage of the total nitrogen pool in an environment. To combat this problem, leguminous plants have developed a symbiotic relationship with the nitrogen fixing bacteria, *Rhizobium* spp. Legumes form root nodules which house *Rhizobium* and provide the bacteria with carbon compounds, while the bacteria fix nitrogen for the plants' consumption (Adler, 1995). This relationship and its mechanisms have become the center of much study, both in the physiological mechanisms and population interactions.

What this sample introduction does right:

It moves from the general to the specific and gives the context for the research. It sets up the literature review which will follow. *Note: This background information is typically followed by a review of the research and the writer's hypothesis.*

Note: Unlike in the Humanities, scientific papers are more concerned with the data or information than the way it is worded. Scientific papers use paraphrases and summaries often *but not direct quotations*.

*Sample Introduction taken from:

"The scientific paper: Student examples." (2006). *A guide to writing in the Biological Sciences*. Retrieved April 13, 2006, from <http://classweb.gmu.edu/WAC/Biology/Introduction2.pdf>.

Works Consulted:

- Porush, D. (1995). *A short guide to writing about science*. New York: Longman.
- Rosenwasser, D. & Stephen, J. (2003). *Writing analytically*. (3rd ed.). Boston: Heinle.