

5 FATAL ERRORS OF INTRODUCTION

1. **The Place Holder Introduction** When you don't have much to say on a given topic, it is easy to create this kind of introduction. Essentially, this weak introduction contains several sentences that are vague and do not 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.**

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 be an effective strategy, but it can be easy to stop at JUST restating the question instead of offering a more effective, interesting introduction to your paper. Often, the instructor wrote your questions and will be reading ten to seventy essays in response to them--they do not need to read a whole paragraph that simply restates the question.

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. 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 assignment.** 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 beginning 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 fifth-grade 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. Penguin Books published it in 1986. He tells the story of his life.

Introductory Paragraph Pointers

1. Ask yourself
 - What is my topic?
 - What is my thesis?
 - What does the reader need to know right away?
2. Include as much critical information (full names of authors or books, important historical background, etc.) as will logically fit.
3. Do not worry about your opening sounding like an opening - if it is too formal, it will appear impersonal.
4. Do not commit any of the 5 Fatal Errors of Introduction.
5. Write the introduction last. It helps to write up all of your evidence first and then write the introduction -- that way you can be sure that the introduction matches the body of the paper.
6. Pay special attention to your first sentence. If any sentence in your paper is going to be completely free of errors and vagueness, it should be your first one.
7. Be straightforward and confident. You cannot expect a reader to believe your ideas if it sounds like you do not believe them yourself.

Helpful Examples

Direct Announcement: "A Solution to Graffiti Problems"

There is no one complete method of solving the graffiti problem. Increased lighting of streets and buildings at night, limited spray paint cans, and new graffiti-proof building materials can all help to decrease the graffiti problem. Graffiti removal is a costly process, and all of these methods should be used to try to decrease the problem of graffiti.

Question and Series of Related Facts

What do Cornbread, Cool Earl, and Rembrandt have in common? "Nothing," say the millions who are appalled at the notion of graffiti by the first two well-known Philadelphia graffiti "artists" whose work has defaced many city buildings. "Quite a bit," argue the defenders of this unusual kind of "folk art." While a vocal minority champions the spray paint "artists," concerned citizens are banding together to find a solution to problems created by such "creative expression."

Definition

"Graffiti" is an Italian word that refers to works or phrases written on public sidewalks or buildings. Ancient examples of this "public writing" were found on the walls of the city of Pompeii when it was unearthed. Today, the term often signifies the spray-painted slogans that "decorate" urban schools, houses, and even subway cars. To some people, graffiti is a valid and even artistic means of self-expression. To most people, however, graffiti represents an ever-increasing urban problem calling for an immediate solution.

Quotation

In a national symposium on graffiti, David Adams, noted art historian, stated: "Time was when 'Kilroy was here' decorated many out-of-the-way places, but now it has been replaced by more exotic signatures, and the penciled comments have given way to spray-painted slogans." As Dr. Adams pointed out, once graffiti writing moved out of the restrooms and onto the streets, it immediately became an object of concern among citizens trying to solve our urban problems. Elimination of this unsightly blight presents a real problem.

Anecdote

Yesterday, Billy Barnes came home at 3:30 and let himself into his house with the key he carries to school. After fixing himself a snack of five Oreo cookies and a glass of grape Kool-Aid, Billy watched MTV for two hours. When the doorbell rang, Billy didn't answer it, choosing instead to peer out the window until the stranger went away. At 5:30, Billy remembered that he was supposed to call his mother when he got home from school, but, when he called, she was in a meeting and could not be disturbed. Billy is seven years old; he represents a growing number of latchkey kids who pay the price for their parents' changing lifestyles.

Refutation

Many people believe that the legalization of marijuana would cause a widespread increase in drug addiction and crime. Actually, as a moderate legalization is beginning to show in some states, legalization probably will create a drop in crime, as marijuana ceases to be contraband and a black-market product.

Presenting a New Slant

Sickle cell anemia, a serious disease that mainly threatens blacks, has recently become the target of an extensive health campaign on both state and federal levels. This campaign has been received by the public with tremendous approval. It's about time, however, that the other side of the story was revealed since programs to test for and treat the disease have undoubtedly been undertaken with good intentions but have some decidedly negative effects.

Strategies For

Introductory Paragraphs

- Ask a question.
- Relate an incident
- Use a vivid quotation.
- Offer a surprising statistic or other fact.
- State an opinion related to your thesis.
- Provide background.
- Create a visual image that represents your subject.
- Make a historical comparison or contrast.
- Outline a problem or dilemma.
- Define a word central to your subject.
- Outline the argument that your thesis refutes.

Concluding Paragraphs

- Answer a question.
- Create a visual image that represents your subject from the opening.
- Use a quotation.
- Restate your thesis and reflect on its implications.
- Recommend a course of action.
- Echo the approach of the introduction.
- Summarize the paper.
- Strike a note of hope or despair.
- Give a symbolic fact or detail.
- Give an especially compelling example.

Openings to Avoid

- Do not reach too far with vague generalities or truths, such as those beginning "Through out human history...", or "In today's world..." You may have needed a warm-up paragraph to start drafting, but your readers can do without it.
- Do not start with "The purpose of this essay is...", or any similar flat announcement of your intention or topic.
- Do not start with "According to Webster..." or a similar phrase leading to a dictionary definition. A definition can be an effective springboard to an essay, but this kind of lead-in has become dull with overuse.

Closings to Avoid

- Do not simply restate your introduction - statement of subject, thesis sentence, and all. Presumably the paragraphs in the body of your essay have contributed something to the opening statements, and it's that something you want to capture in your conclusion.
- Do not start off in a new direction, with a subject different from the one your essay has been about. If you arrive at a new idea, this may be a signal to start fresh with that idea in your thesis.
- Do not conclude more that you reasonably can from the evidence you have presented. If your essay is about your frustrating experience trying to clear a parking ticket, you cannot reasonably conclude that all local police forces are caught up in formalities.