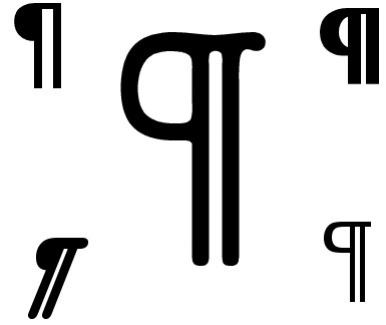


# Introductory Paragraphs

Students are told from the first time they receive instruction in English composition that their introductory paragraphs should accomplish two tasks:

1. They should get the reader's interest so that he or she will want to read more.
2. They should let the reader know what the writing is going to be about.



The second task can be accomplished by a carefully crafted “thesis statement”. Writing thesis statements can be learned rather quickly. The first task – securing the reader’s interest – is more difficult. It is this task that this discussion addresses.

First, admit that it is impossible to say or do or write anything that will interest everybody. With that out of the way, the question then becomes: “What can a writer do that will secure the interest of a fair sized audience?”

Professional writers who write for magazines and receive pay for their work use five basic patterns to grab a reader’s interest:

1. Historical review
2. Anecdotal
3. Surprising statement
4. Famous person
5. Declarative

What follows is an explanation of each of these patterns with examples from real magazine articles to illustrate the explanations.

**1 *Historical review:*** Some topics are better understood if a brief historical review of the topic is presented to lead into the discussion of the moment. Such topics might include “a biographical sketch of a war hero”, “an upcoming execution of a convicted criminal”, or “drugs and the younger generation”. Obviously, there are many, many more topics that could be introduced by reviewing the history of the topic before the writer gets down to the nitty gritty of his paper. It is important that the historical review be brief so that it does not take over the paper.

Example #1: Taken from the article “Integration Turns 40” by Juan Williams. *Modern Maturity*, April/May 1994.

The victory brought pure elation and joy. It was May 1954, just days after the Supreme Court’s landmark ruling in Brown V. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. At NAACP headquarters in New York, the mood was euphoric. Telegrams of congratulations poured in from around the world; reporters and well-wishers crowded the halls.

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[After reaching back forty years ago to bring up the landmark Supreme Court decision that started school desegregation, this article discusses school segregation in the present time.]

**2 Anecdotal:** An anecdote is a little story. Everyone loves to listen to stories. Begin a paper by relating a small story that leads into the topic of your paper. Your story should be a small episode, not a full blown story with characters, a plot, and a setting. Read some of the anecdotes in the Reader Digest special sections such as “Life in These United States” to learn how to tell small but potent stories. If you do it right, your story will capture the reader’s interest so that he or she will continue to read your paper. Remember, it is an introduction, not the paper.

Example #2: Taken from the article “Going, Going, GONE” by Laurie Goering. *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, July 4, 1994.

Mike Cantlon remembers coming across his first auction ten years ago while cruising the back roads of Wisconsin. He parked his car and wandered into the crowd, toward the auctioneer’s singsong chant and wafting smell of barbecued sandwiches. Hours later, Cantlon emerged lugging a \$22 beam drill - for constructing post-and-beam barns – and a passion for auctions that has clung like a cocklebur on an old saddle blanket. “It’s an addiction,” says Cantlon, a financial planner and one of the growing number of auction fanatics for whom Saturdays will never be the same.

[This is an anecdote, a little story about one man and his first auction, that is the lead to an article about auctions. In this article, the author explains what auctions are, how to spot bargain in auctions, what to protect yourself from at auctions, and other facts about auctions and the people who go to them.]

**3 Surprising statement:** A surprising statement is a favorite introductory technique of professional writers. There are many ways a statement can surprise a reader. Sometimes the statement is surprising because it is disgusting. Sometimes it is joyful. Sometimes it is shocking. Sometimes it is surprising because of who said it. Sometimes it is surprising because it includes profanity. Professional writers have honed this technique to a fine edge. It is not used as much as the first two patterns, but it is used.

Example #3: Taken from the article “60 Seconds That Could Save Your Child” by Cathy Perlmutter. *Prevention*, September 1993.

Have a minute? Good. Because that may be all it takes to save the life of a child – your child. Accidents kill nearly 8000 children under age 15 each year. And for every fatality, 42 more children are admitted to hospitals for treatment. Yet such deaths and injuries can be avoided though these easy steps parents can take right now. You don’t have a minute to lose.

[This article begins with a surprising, even shocking, static – 8000 children die each year from accidents. The article then lists seven easy actions a person can take to help guard a child against accidents. These range from turning down the water heater to 120 degrees Fahrenheit to putting firearms under lock and key.]

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# ***Introductory Paragraphs***

**4 Famous Person:** People like to know what celebrities say and do. Dropping the name of a famous person at the beginning of a paper usually gets the reader's attention. It may be something that person said or something he or she did that can be presented as an interest grabber. You may just mention the famous person's name to get the reader's interest. The famous person may be dead or alive. The famous person may be a good person, like the Pope, or her or she may be a bad person, like John Wilkes Booth. Of course, bringing up this person's name must be relevant to the topic. Even though the statement or action may not be readily relevant, a clever writer can convince the reader that it is relevant.

Example #4: Taken from the article "Dear Taxpayer" by Will Manley. *Booklist*, May 1, 1993.

The most widely read writer in America today is not Stephen King, Michael Crichton, or John Grisham. It's Margaret Milner Richardson, the Commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service, whose name appears on the "1040 Forms and Instruction" booklet. I doubt Margaret wrote the entire 1040 pamphlet, but the annual introductory letter, "A Note from the Commissioner," bears her signature.

[This is the first paragraph of an article about the lady named above. The author used the names of three famous, modern American writers to get a reader's interest. Notice that the first name on his list is a name that is probably more widely known than the other two. Stephen King has been around for some time now, and everyone, from teenagers to grandparents, know his name, whether they have read his books or not.]

**5 Declarative:** This technique is quite commonly used, but it must be carefully used, or the writer defeats his whole purpose of using one of these patters, to get the reader's interest. In this pattern, the writer simply states straight out what the topic of his paper is going to be about. It is the technique that most student writers use with only modest success most of the time, but good professional writers use it too.

Example #5: Taken from the article "The Tuition Tap" by Tim Lindemuth. *K-Stater*, February, 1994.

In the College of Veterinary Medicine and Engineering, for example, nearly one-third of the teaching faculty may retire by the year 2004. In the College of Education, more than a third of the professors are 55 years old and older. The largest turnover for a single department is projected to be in geology. More than half of its faculty this year are in the age group that will retire at the millennium, says Ron Downey of K-State's Office of Institutional Research and Analysis. The graying of K-State's faculty is not unique. A Regents' report shows approximately 27 percent of the faculty at the six state universities will retire by the end of this decade, create a shortage of senior faculty.

[This is a straight forward introduction that gets right down to the topic of the aging of the faculty of Kansas State University. There are no historical reviews, no surprising statements, no anecdotes, no quotations from or about famous people. This is a discussion that leads to further discussion about the topic. The biggest difficulty about this type of introduction is that it can get boring. It is not likely to get

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the interest of anyone except those who are already interested in this subject. Use this pattern with caution.]

These patterns can give a “life” to your writing. Practice them. Try using two or three different patterns for your introductory paragraph and see which introductory paragraph is best; it’s often a delicate matter of tone and of knowing who your audience is. Do not forget, though, that your introductory paragraph must also include a thesis statement to let your reader know what your topic is and what you are going to say about that topic.

## **Things NOT to do in an introductory paragraph:**

- Apologize. Never suggest that you don’t know what you’re talking about or that you’re not enough of an expert in this matter that your opinion would matter. Your reader will quickly turn to something else. Avoid phrases like the following:

In my [humble] opinion...  
I’m not sure about this, but...

- Announce your intentions. Do not flatly announce what you are about to do in an essay.

In this paper I will...  
The purpose of this essay is to...

Get into the topic and let your reader perceive your purpose in the topic sentence of your beginning paragraph.

- Use a dictionary or encyclopedia definition

According to Merriam-Webster’s WWWebster Dictionary, a widget is...

Although definitions are extremely useful and it might serve your purpose to devise your own definition(s) later in the essay, you want to avoid using this hackneyed begging to an essay.

- Dilly-dally. Get to it. Move confidently into your essay. Many writers find it useful to write a warm-up paragraph (or two even) to get them into the essay, to sharpen their own idea of what they’re up to, and then they go back and delete the running state.

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