Guidelines for Introductions

1. Use the introduction to set the tone for your essay or paper. Appear to be interested in the topic; make it seem to be of vital concern to you, at least for the time you are writing the paper. Develop an assured tone. Phrases such as “I hope to prove” or “I would like to show” only make you appear insecure, which then casts doubt on what you say.

2. Catch the reader's attention. You want the reader to want to read your paper. Start with an example, a quotation, a statistic, a question, or a complaint and use it as a theme that you refer to throughout the paper.

3. State your thesis and provide a subtle blueprint for the paper. Without giving away all your wonderful points, let the reader know where your paper is headed. But don't say, “First I will talk about X, then I will talk about Y.” Be careful, too, of confusing your method of organization with your thesis. To say, “I will compare Huckleberry Finn and Moby Dick” only tells us what you will do—but why are you comparing them? What is the purpose? What is your thesis statement?

4. Don’t be afraid to break up your introduction into several paragraphs. One huge paragraph at the outset of a paper most likely will put readers off.

5. Unless they are specifically called for by your instructor or your discipline, avoid such phrases as “I will discuss” or “This paper will examine.” Better to just dive right in.

Here are some introductions and suggestions on how to improve them:

From History

The McCarthy Hearings of the 1950s were made a black comedy by the circumstances surrounding the hearings. Behind this façade lay issues that were deeply disturbing to the Americans of the fifties. By an examination of the McCarthy Hearings, some of the issues can begin to be perceived and analyzed and perhaps they can reveal a better understanding of the decade.

The major problem here is that there is no thesis. The last sentence, “By an examination...,“ seems like it will be a thesis, but turns out instead to be a discussion of the method of the paper ("perceived and analyzed"). Every paper aims to present a better understanding of something; that is a given, not a thesis.

From History of Art

This paper's intent is to compare Georgia O'Keefe’s giant flower paintings with Judy Chicago's “The Dinner Party.” Comparison will be made between the two artists' methods of depicting feminine sexuality and possible reasons for the two conceptions.

This is a statement of purpose and method, but comparison is a method of organization and development—not an end in itself. Note that there is no thesis; this paper seems to be a comparison for comparison's sake. “Possible reasons for the two conceptions” suggests that the writer might have a thesis in mind, but the reader can't be sure.

From Anthropology

While the various authors/compilers of fables accurately portray the story's attitudes towards unnecessary conflict and violence, each author/compiler has some opportunity to advocate or excuse some acts that seem just as violent or unacceptable as others. The culture the fable comes from, and the time it comes from, have a great deal to do with the differentiation between "needless" and "justified." However, some clearly similar themes do emerge when one examines in detail the function of violence in several fables.

A well-written introduction, this paragraph presents a good overview of the subject. But at the very last line, we see that there is no thesis: an overview through time is a summary. The writer needs an argumentative edge here—a point to be made.

From Botany

In this paper, the growth rate of Sequoia sempervirens (Coast Redwoods) will be compared with the growth rate of Sequoiadendron giganteum (Giant Sequoias). Environmental as well as genetic influences will be examined.

This introduction should be rewritten in the active voice and should include at least a hint about why this study is being conducted.