

How to write a good introduction

The introduction should be the first and the last thing you write. Think of it as a roadmap—both for yourself and for your readers. If you start writing before you have a good first draft of the introduction, you might get lost. By contrast, the best way to write a strong essay is to write a strong introduction.

A strong introduction is also the best way to make a good impression on your readers. First impressions count—and if you can sell your idea on the first page (on in the first paragraph, depending on the length of the essay), your reader(s) (including the lecturers and tutors marking your work) are more likely to look favorably upon what follows.

Once your essay is finished and you have revised it, go back and revise the introduction to reflect the actual results and structure of your essay.

The length of the introduction will depend on the length of the essay—for a short essay, 3 sentences are enough. A good introduction should include the following:

Epistemic goals / aims: What is the main question that you wish to address in your essay? What do you want to understand, what do you want to know? If you are writing an essay about a particular paper or book, please be careful to distinguish your own aims from those of the texts discussed in your essay! The introduction should state concisely which question you want to address. If you have been given one (or several) essay questions to choose from, this is your opportunity to narrow the focus of you are writing on, to say which aspect you are addressing, and how exactly you understand the question. This can be a single sentence - and it's good to actually formulate it as a question.

Before you state your question, you may want to create a sense of mystery and of urgency. You can use an example or anecdote, or a research finding or controversy to provide some context for your question. This can also be called “setting up the problem” - which then your essay goes on to solve for the reader!

Argumentative goals / claims: What is the main claim that you are going to defend throughout the essay, and how does that claim answer your main question? Again, a single sentence is enough. Think of this as a **spoiler**: briefly summarize, as succinctly as possible, the most important result(s) / the take-home message of your essay. Note that this might be very difficult to do at the beginning - just try your best, and then go back and revise your introduction carefully once you have finished your essay, so that the claim reflects what you have actually argued for.

Note well: Especially for unexperienced writers, it's very common to overestimate how much ground you can cover in an essay. This means that in practice, you might start out with a broader question or stronger claim than you can actually defend. This is why it's important to adjust the introduction at the end. Generally, addressing a narrow question that you can really answer well is much better than trying to do too much, and doing it superficially.

Structure: Describe the structure of your essay and briefly comment on its individual sections. How exactly are you going to argue for your claim? How does the essay's structure help you do this? Most of the time, it makes sense to start with an expository section reconstructing the arguments of the author(s) you are discussing; then, state your own argument; say why it's valid and why the reasons you offer support your claim; show that the premises are true; if applicable and if you have room, consider objections to your view and indicate how you could respond to them; conclusion: state the upshot of your position, say why it's relevant, and if applicable, suggest questions for future research. Don't introduce any new ideas in the concluding section! While this is a typical structure for an essay, the optimal structure will depend on your topic, and there's no one-size-fits-all solution.

Optional: relevance / context: Why are the claims defended in your essay relevant to the broader discussion, and what are the most important contributions and consequences for future research? In other words: why should readers care about your essay and take the time to read it? This can be done in one sentence; in introductions to short essays, this can be omitted.

Optional: You may also, if appropriate, want to mention in the introduction **which questions you do not address** in your essay and which **key assumptions** you make without explicitly arguing for them.

That's it – a good introduction summarizes your question, your claim, and your strategy for defending your claim; plus, if you have room (and if you are writing a longer essay), some remarks on relevance and key assumptions. Your epistemic and argumentative goals suggest how you should structure your essay – and once you have written the introduction and have your roadmap, you really just have to follow these directions for the rest of the essay, and then go back and revise at the very end.

Note that in longer essays or research theses, you can use a **similar strategy at the beginning of each section**. That is, start sections by briefly explaining which function this section fulfills and how it fits into the broader context of your essay. How are the claims defended in this section relevant to your overall argument, what do we gain from this section? Which question are you asking here, what will be the most important result, and how do you argue for it?

A final piece of advice: Your introduction is not a mini-essay: don't try to present your argument or defend your claim in the introduction. Instead, explain what your question and claim are, and briefly signpost which sections your essay has, rather than trying to summarize everything you actually say in those sections. Getting this right will take some practice and might require several drafts.

Before you submit: Don't forget to **proofread** your essay for typos and to spend some time on **formatting**! **Revising is often as important as writing** – so make sure that you have enough time for this before you submit your work.

Especially if you are writing a research thesis, consider using a **reference manager** such as Endnote, Citavi, Zotero, or Bibtex. Ask your supervisor or lecturer for recommendations, as different disciplines have different preferences.