

Handout: Introductions to Avoid (Adapted from the University of North Carolina Writing Center)

Six Kinds of Less Effective Introductions

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 kind of weaker introduction contains several sentences that are vague and don't 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.

Weak Example: Deception is an important theme in Twelfth Night. There are many different aspects of deceit in the play. Each creates different kinds of problems for the characters.

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. The instructor wrote your topic and will be reading ten to seventy essays in response to them—he or she does not need to read a whole paragraph that simply restates the question. Try to do something more interesting.

Weak Example: By paying close attention to the passage on page 62, one can see the relations between Shakespeare's language and important themes in the play. Doing so shows how complicated and interesting Shakespeare's language was.

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 class and assignment. Also recognize that the dictionary is also not a particularly authoritative work -- it doesn't take into account the context of your course and doesn't offer particularly detailed information. If you feel that you must seek out an authority, try to find one that is very relevant and specific. Perhaps a quotation from a source reading might prove better? Dictionary introductions are also ineffective simply because they are so overused. You might find a more creative way to define your terms, or perhaps you could weave a definition into a more attention-grabbing introductory paragraph.

4. “Since the Dawn of Time” 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.

Weak Example: Since the dawn of man, love has been a topic for artists to write about.

or

William Shakespeare, the greatest poet in the English language, had many insights into human nature.

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.

Weak Example: William Shakespeare wrote Twelfth Night in around 1600. It tells the story of Viola and Sebastian, twins separated by a shipwreck. The play is a tale of mistaken identities that lead to a comic resolution.

6. The Unrelated Anecdote or Example. Sometimes a personal story closely related to your essay topic can garner your reader's interest and make your essay relevant to them. More often, though, they can lead your reader to think that you are not serious about your topic or that you don't have something serious to say. Therefore, decide carefully when using this kind of introduction.

Example: I was walking down Locust Walk the other day and saw a guy wearing a dress. “Wow,” I thought, that is so surprising to see. It made me realize how shocking it must have been for a member of Shakespeare's audience to see a guy in a dress.