

UNIVERSITY WRITING PROGRAM

FIVE KINDS OF INEFFECTIVE INTRODUCTIONS

Since the beginning of time, bullshit, flowery overgeneralization with at least one thesaurus'd vocabulary word. In addition, irrelevant and misleading personal anecdote. However, oversimplification of first Googled author (citation: p. 37).

Thesis statement which doesn't follow whatsoever from the previous.

Jon Wu, "A Generic College Paper," www.mcsweeneys.net

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.
 - a. 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 sometimes be an effective strategy, but it can be easy to stop at JUST restating the question instead of offering a more specific, interesting introduction to your paper. The professor or teaching assistant wrote your questions 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.
 - a. 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 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 helps your 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 what it 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, or if you use a definition from one of the sources you've been reading for class. 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. Many graders will see twenty or more papers that begin in this way, greatly decreasing the dramatic impact that any one of those papers will have.

- a. 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.
 - a. Example: *Since the dawn 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 elementary school 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.
 - a. Example: *Frederick Douglass wrote his autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, in the 1840s. It was published in 1986 by Penguin Books. In it, he tells the story of his life.*

Credit: Adapted from <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/introductions/>. University Writing Center, 2020.

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