

UNIVERSITY WRITING PROGRAM

WRITING SUCCESSFUL INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPHS

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In the most abstract sense, the function of an introductory paragraph is to move the reader from the world of daily life into the textual and analytical space of an essay.

In a more concrete sense, an introduction performs three essential functions:

- It clearly and specifically states the topic or question that you will address in your essay.
- It motivates the topic or question that the essay will examine.
- It states, clearly and directly, your position on this topic or question (i.e., your thesis).

Conceptual Components

- **Persona.** While reading your introduction, your reader will begin to make assumptions about you as an author. Be sure to project yourself as a thoughtful, knowledgeable and nonbiased writer capable of dealing effectively with the complexities and nuances of your topic. Your introduction should set the tone that will remain consistent throughout your essay. In addition to emphasizing the uniqueness of your approach to your subject matter, you should seek to draw your reader into your essay with the gracefulness of your prose and the rational demeanor you project as a writer.
- **Contextualization.** In addition to stating the topic and scope of your analysis, your introduction should provide your readers with any background or context necessary to understand how your argument fits into the larger discourse on the subject. The details you use to orient your reader with your topic should be woven throughout the structural components of your introduction listed below.

Structural Components

- **Opener.** In addition to grabbing the reader's attention, the opening sentence of an essay sets up the structure of the introductory paragraph. You want to create movement among your ideas, which is best done by moving either from the particular to the general or from the general to the particular. Essays that move from the particular to the general often begin with an anecdote, quotation, fact or detail from the text that can be used to introduce readers to the larger issues the essay will address. Introductions that move from the general to the particular — typically referred to as the funnel structure — often begin with a wider view of the topic that will be used to establish a context for the more localized argument that the author will present.
- **Shared Context.** Claims about the topic that the author posits as common knowledge or uncontroversial, which the reader will readily accept as true without extensive evidence or

argument. The shared context often entails a claim or claims that are obviously true, which the "motive" and "thesis" will then complicate or even oppose.

- **Topic or Purpose.** The introductory paragraph must leave the reader with a clear understanding of the specific subject area that your essay will investigate. Defining your essay's scope in this way often requires distinguishing your specific focus from the larger discourse on your topic. Though this is not always essential, many essays include a purpose statement that tells the reader directly: "this paper examines..." or "the aim of this essay is to..."
- **Motive.** The motive is a specific sentence, usually near the middle of your introduction, that clarifies for the reader why your thesis is interesting, nonobvious and/or contestable. In essence, your motive answers the question "so what?" that a reader might ask of your thesis. Because they show that the truth about a subject is not as clear as it might seem, motive statements often employ terms of reversal — "yet," "but," "however," etc. — that reflect a departure from the obvious.
- **Thesis Statement.** The thesis statement is the central claim your essay will make about your chosen topic. Since the topic area must first be described and motivated, the thesis statement is usually placed near the end of the introduction.
- **Roadmap.** Though this is often unnecessary in shorter papers, essays that are long (seven-plus pages) or especially complex are often easier for the reader to understand if the author offers some preview of the essay's structure at the beginning of the paper. In especially long essays (20-plus pages), this outline of the essay's structure may demand a paragraph of its own (usually the second paragraph).

Example Body Paragraph

Here is an example of an introductory paragraph that we will analyze sentence by sentence:

Dublin is such a small city: everyone knows everyone else's business. This is Doran's lament, one of many such laments in *Dubliners*, a book whose very title seems to presage a comprehensive portrait of Ireland's capital city. Joyce makes full use of the advantages Dublin offers as a setting. Both national capital and provincial town, the city was the ideal site for cutting — and often scathing — dissections of this land. It would be unfortunate, however, to see *Dubliners* merely as an ethnographic study, for Joyce's commentary has a broader scope. Dublin comes to serve as a locale for a drama which is played out all over the world, a drama about home. Joyce studies the nature of home, what it is and what it means to leave it. However different his characters may be, together they form a tableau which, while it does much to indict the idea of home, also shows a deep compassion for those who are bound to it. Although this theme may be examined in many stories — the failed attempt at leaving in "Eveline" is an obvious example — a look at two less obvious works, "The Boarding House" and "Little Cloud," may best suggest its subtlety and pervasiveness.

Example Introductory Paragraph: Structural Components

In this table, each structural component of the introduction is listed in the left column, and the corresponding sample text is on the right:

Structural Component	Example Introductory Paragraph
Opener	<i>Dublin is such a small city: everyone knows everyone else's business.</i>
Shared Context	<i>This is Doran's lament, one of many such laments in <i>Dubliners</i>, a book whose very title seems to presage a comprehensive portrait of Ireland's capital city. Joyce makes full use of the advantages Dublin offers as a setting. Both national capital and provincial town, the city was the ideal site for cutting — and often scathing — dissections of this land.</i>
Motive	<i>It would be unfortunate, however, to see <i>Dubliners</i> merely as an ethnographic study, for Joyce's commentary has a broader scope.</i>
Topic or Purpose	<i>Dublin comes to serve as a locale for a drama which is played out all over the world, a drama about home. Joyce studies the nature of home, what it is and what it means to leave it.</i>
Thesis Statement	<i>However different his characters may be, together they form a tableau which, while it does much to indict the idea of home, also shows a deep compassion for those who are bound to it.</i>
Roadmap	<i>Although this theme may be examined in many stories — the failed attempt at leaving in "Eveline" is an obvious example — a look at two less obvious works, "The Boarding House" and "Little Cloud," may best suggest its subtlety and pervasiveness.</i>

Example Introductory Paragraph: Analysis

Opener

- *Dublin is such a small city: everyone knows everyone else's business.*

This introduction proceeds from the particular to the general (it is also common to proceed from the general to the particular), beginning with a quotation before moving on to more large-scale issues. It is important to note that, while the opening quotation sets up this structure, it is reinforced by the author's movement from an initial discussion of Joyce's ethnographic rendering of Dublin itself to a broader discussion of Dublin's more universal significance as a site of home (the topic of this essay). Structuring your introduction in this way — "particular to general" or "general

to particular” — ensures movement among your ideas and creates interest for the reader by suggesting a similar movement of ideas in the essay as a whole.

Shared Context

- *This is Doran’s lament, one of many such laments in Dubliners, a book whose very title seems to presage a comprehensive portrait of Ireland’s capital city. Joyce makes full use of the advantages Dublin offers as a setting. Both national capital and provincial town, the city was the ideal site for cutting — and often scathing — dissections of this land.*

The author posits these claims as foundational, expecting that they will be readily accepted by her readers. Students of Joyce will recognize them as commonplaces. Others will accept them as authoritative precisely because the author presents them as informational, without substantial evidence. Having established a baseline of common wisdom, the author will proceed to complicate it with the word “however,” signaling the motivating move of the essay.

Motive

- *It would be unfortunate, however, to see Dubliners merely as an ethnographic study, for Joyce’s commentary has a broader scope.*

This essay is given its motive as a result of the author’s claim that there is a lot more to Joyce’s presentation of Dublin than is evident in an initial reading of *Dubliners*. Implicitly, the author is telling her readers that they should continue reading her essay in order to be shown things about the novel’s rendering of Dublin that they would not otherwise have seen. The goal of the essay then becomes to fulfill this promise made to the reader. Note how the motive’s placement in the introduction is related directly to the paragraph’s structure: after presenting a more narrow and obvious reading of *Dubliners* in the opening sentences, the author inserts the motive in order to describe how her essay broadens the scope of this reading in a less obvious way that she elaborates on in the rest of the introduction.

Topic or Purpose

- *Dublin comes to serve as a locale for a drama which is played out all over the world, a drama about home. Joyce studies the nature of home, what it is and what it means to leave it.*

The author very specifically states her topic — Joyce’s Dublin as a “local for a drama ... about home” — in order to clarify the scope of the essay for her readers. The purpose of her essay will be to explore and arrive at some conclusions about this topic. Again, note that the author’s placement of the novel’s topic relates directly to the structure she has chosen for her introduction: immediately after the motive in which the author informs the reader that she will not pursue a more obvious ethnographic investigation of Joyce’s Dublin, she tells the reader

clearly and directly what topic her essay will explore. Because it is essential to clearly define an essay's topic before presenting a thesis about it, the topic statement also precedes the thesis statement.

Thesis Statement

- *However different his characters may be, together they form a tableau which, while it does much to indict the idea of home, also shows a deep compassion for those who are bound to it.*

The author's thesis statement is particularly strong because it pursues a tension in the novel by examining the way in which Joyce's attitude toward home pushes in two directions. It has Joyce simultaneously indicting and showing compassion for different aspects of home in *Dubliners*. As in most college essays, the thesis statement comes toward the end of the introduction. Again, note the way in which the placement of the thesis statement fits into the overall structure of the introduction: the author motivates and clearly defines her topic before offering her thesis about it. Giving the reader a clear understanding of the the topic to be explored in an essay (as this author does) is essential for the formulation of a thesis statement with this sort of tension and double-edged complexity.

Roadmap

- *Although this theme may be examined in many stories — the failed attempt at leaving in “Eveline” is an obvious example — a look at two less obvious works, “The Boarding House” and “Little Cloud,” may best suggest its subtlety and pervasiveness.*

While this author's roadmap falls a bit short of the brief outline of an essay's structure that is often found in the introduction of longer college essays, she does give the reader an indication of the argumentative path the body of her essay will follow. In addition, indicating that she has limited herself to an examination of two of the novel's 15 stories further clarifies the essay's scope, and the reference to these works as “less obvious” enhances her motive.

Credit: Doug Kirshen, University Writing Center

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