

From Introductions to Conclusions

Drafting an Essay

In this chapter, we describe strategies for crafting introductions that set up your argument. We then describe the characteristics of well-formulated paragraphs that will help you build your argument. Finally, we provide you with some strategies for writing conclusions that reinforce what is new about your argument, what is at stake, and what readers should do with the knowledge you convey.

DRAFTING INTRODUCTIONS

The introduction is where you set up your argument. It's where you establish that the issue or problem you focus on is timely and relevant, identify a widely held assumption or gap, challenge that assumption or suggest how your research will fill that gap, and state your thesis. You can also state the question that motivates your research and reframe or change the "conversation" in order to prompt readers to see an issue in a new way. Writers use a number of strategies to set up their arguments. In this section we look at six of them:

- Moving from a general topic and issue to a specific thesis (inverted-triangle introduction)
- Introducing the issue with a story (narrative introduction)
- Beginning with a question (interrogative introduction)
- Capturing readers' attention with something unexpected (paradoxical introduction)
- Identifying a gap in knowledge (minding-the-gap introduction)
- Changing the conversation (reframing introduction)

Remember that an introduction need not be limited to a single paragraph. It may take several paragraphs to effectively set up your argument, as we indicate in Chapter 6.

Keep in mind that you have to make these strategies your own. That is, we can suggest models, but you must make them work for your own argument. You must imagine your readers and what will engage them using appeals to their emotions, sensibilities, and intellect. What will you do to get readers to follow your line of argument? What tone do you want to take? Playful? Serious? Formal? Urgent? The attitude you want to convey will depend on your purpose, your argument, and the needs of your audience.

■ The Inverted-Triangle Introduction

An **inverted-triangle introduction**, like an upside-down triangle, is broad at the top and pointed at the base. It begins with a description of the problem or issue and then narrows its focus, ending with the point of the paragraph (and the triangle), the writer's thesis. We can see this strategy at work in the following introduction from a student's essay. The student writer (1) begins with a broad description of the problem she will address, (2) then focuses on a set of widely held but troublesome assumptions, and (3) finally, presents her thesis in response to what she sees as a pervasive problem.

The student begins with a general set of assumptions about education that she believes people readily accept.

She then cites author bell hooks to identify an approach that makes use of these assumptions—the “banking system” of education, a term hooks borrows from educator Paulo Freire.

The student then points to the banking system as the source of a misconception or gap that she wants to correct. This sets up her thesis about the “true purpose” of education.

In recent debates focusing on curricular reform in schools, many voice the belief that education's sole purpose is to communicate information for students to store and draw on as necessary. By storing this information, students hope to perform well on tests. Good test scores assure good grades. Good grades eventually lead to acceptances into good colleges, which ultimately guarantee good jobs. Many teachers and students, convinced that education exists as a tool to secure good jobs, rely on the *banking system*. In her essay “Teaching to Transgress,” bell hooks defines the *banking system* as an “approach to learning that is rooted in the notion that all students need to do is consume information fed to them by a professor and be able to memorize and store it” (185). Through the banking system, students focus solely on facts, missing the important themes and life lessons available in classes and school materials. The banking system misdirects the fundamental goals of education. Education's true purpose is to prepare students for the real world by allowing them access to pertinent life knowledge available in their studies. Education should then entice students to apply this pertinent life knowledge to daily life struggles through praxis. In addition to her definition of the banking system, hooks offers the idea of praxis from the work of Paulo Freire. When incorporated into education, *praxis*, or “action and

reflection upon the world in order to change it” (185), offers an advantageous educational tool that enhances the true purpose of education and overcomes the banking system.

The strategy of writing an introduction as an inverted triangle entails first identifying an idea, an argument, or a concept that people appear to accept as true; next, pointing out the problems with that idea, argument, or concept; and then, in a few sentences, setting out a thesis. It’s important to acknowledge and evaluate multiple perspectives to pave the way for you to present your own position. In this case, the student writer challenges an assumption by offering alternative perspectives and providing multiple voices—her own and the published authors who also call attention to the purpose of education that others have overlooked.

■ The Narrative Introduction

Opening with a short **narrative**, or story, is a strategy many writers use successfully to draw readers into the problem that they want to address. A narrative introduction relates a sequence of events and can be especially effective if you think you need to coax indifferent or reluctant readers into taking an interest in the topic that you believe they should know about. Of course, a narrative introduction delays the declaration of your argument, so it’s wise to choose a short story that clearly connects to your argument and get to the thesis as quickly as possible (within a few paragraphs) before your readers start wondering “What’s the point of this story?”

Notice how the student writer uses a narrative introduction to her argument in her essay titled “Throwing a Punch at Gender Roles: How Women’s Boxing Empowers Women.”

The student’s entire first paragraph is a narrative that takes us into the world of women’s boxing and foreshadows her thesis.

Glancing at my watch, I ran into the gym, noting to myself that being late to the first day of boxing practice was not the right way to make a good first impression. I flew down the stairs into the basement, to the room the boxers have lovingly dubbed “The Pit.” What greeted me when I got there was more than I could ever have imagined. Picture a room filled with boxing gloves of all sizes covering an entire wall, a mirror covering another, a boxing ring in a corner, and an awesome collection of framed newspaper and magazine articles chronicling the boxers whose pictures were hanging on every wall. Now picture that room with seventy-plus girls on the floor doing push-ups, sweat dripping down their faces. I was immediately struck by the discipline this sport would require of me, but I had no idea I would take so much more from it.

With her narrative as a backdrop, the student identifies a problem, using the transition word “yet” to mark her challenge to the conditions she observes in the university’s women’s boxing program.

The writer then states her thesis (what her paper “will show”): Despite the problems of stereotyping, women’s boxing offers women significant opportunities for growth.

The university offers the only nonmilitary-based college-level women’s boxing program in America, and it also offers women the chance to push their physical limits in a regulated environment. Yet the program is plagued with disappointments. I have experienced for myself the stereotypes female boxers face and have dealt with the harsh reality that boxing is still widely recognized as only a men’s sport. This paper will show that the women’s boxing program at Notre Dame serves as a much-needed outlet for females to come face-to-face with aspects of themselves they would not typically get a chance to explore. It will also examine how viewing this sport as a positive opportunity for women at ND indicates that there is growing hope that very soon more activities similar to women’s boxing may be better received by society in general. I will accomplish these goals by analyzing scholarly journals, old *Observer* [the school newspaper] articles, and survey questions answered by the captains of the 20-- women’s boxing team of ND.

The student writer uses a visually descriptive narrative to introduce us to the world of women’s college boxing; then, in the second paragraph, she steers us toward the purpose of the paper and the methods she will use to develop her argument about what women’s boxing offers to young women and to the changing world of sports.

A variation on the strategy of setting up an argument with a story is to create a scenario. In the following example, the writer invites readers to imagine a familiar scene that, for many, conjures up assumptions about youth the author wants to change. Notice how Nancy Lesko, a distinguished professor of education, uses this strategy of creating a scenario in *Act Your Age: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence* to “complicate” the nature of identity and “trouble” common misperceptions of adolescence.

The first paragraph is a scenario that invites readers to reflect on a seemingly familiar experience and very subtly begins to challenge readers’ assumptions with references in quotes, such as “another tribe” and the much-quoted adult perspective, “the trouble with teenagers.”

Consider for a moment some familiar public spaces: your local mall, a Cineplex, the outside seating of fast food restaurants, a bowling alley, skateboarding sites, video arcades, or buses around 3 P.M. any Monday through Friday. Ubiquitous in all of those spaces are teenagers—almost always in groups and sporting hair, clothes, piercing, and attitudes that mark them as belonging to “another tribe.” Teenagers are so obvious and omnipresent that we seem hardly to notice them unless their peals of laughter cause us to nervously look their way or they interfere with the expected movement or pace of a common task such as standing in line or shopping for groceries, or they walk too close on the street or in the mall. The ubiquity of teenagers in social spaces beyond households and schools is matched by their prominence in

our talk. . . . They are most often spoken of with familiarity, sometimes with affection, and regularly with some hostility or displeasure. In these various venues and with decidedly mixed emotions, we talk about “the trouble with teenagers.”

The writer follows this scenario and analysis with her intention to challenge conceptions of adolescence and correct some misperceptions that adults have about youth. These false assumptions are rooted in fiction. The author offers a perspective that is based more on reality.

This book takes a closer look at these “troubling teenagers” as stock characters in popular narratives, scientific discourses, and educational programs via endlessly repeated stories—clinical and anecdotal—of instability, emotionality, present-centeredness, and irresponsibility. The ubiquitousness of teenagers with problems, their ability to outrage or worry adults, and the certainty about their naturally-occurring “nature” beg scrutiny. The ready construction of young people into numerous public problems—most recently violent Internet suburbanites, teenage mothers, and urban criminals—suggests that teenagers are complex and malleable accomplishments with broad political and social effects. The overarching aim of this book is to “trouble” these common conceptions of adolescents.

The way the writer uses images can be an effective way to invite reflection on what seems familiar. Is this the way I see youth? Is the author accurate in what she describes? Is her research a credible source for challenging my experience?

■ The Interrogative Introduction

An **interrogative introduction** invites readers into the conversation of your essay by asking one or more questions, which the essay goes on to answer. This is an issue-based question (see Chapter 5) that will pique your readers’ interest, enticing them to read on to discover how your insights shed light on the issue. Notice the question Daphne Spain, a professor of urban and environmental planning, uses to open her essay “Spatial Segregation and Gender Stratification in the Workplace.”

Spain sets up her argument by asking a question and then tentatively answering it with a reference to a published study.

In the third sentence, she states her thesis—that men and women have very little contact in the workplace.

Finally, she outlines the effects that this lack of contact has on women.

To what extent do women and men who work in different occupations also work in different space? Baran and Tee-garden propose that occupational segregation in the insurance industry is “tantamount to spatial segregation by gender” since managers are overwhelmingly male and clerical staff are predominantly female. This essay examines the spatial conditions of women’s work and men’s work and proposes that working women and men come into daily contact with one another very infrequently. Further, women’s jobs can be classified as “open floor,” but men’s jobs are more likely to be “closed door.” That is, women work in a more public environment with less control of their space than men. This lack of spatial control both reflects and contributes to women’s lower occupational status by limiting opportunities for the transfer of knowledge from men to women.

By the end of this introductory paragraph, Spain has explained some of the terms she will use in her essay (*open floor* and *closed door*) and has offered in her final sentence a clear statement of her thesis.

In “Harry Potter and the Technology of Magic,” literature scholar Elizabeth Teare begins by contextualizing the Harry Potter publishing phenomenon. Then she raises a question about what fueled this success story.

In her first four sentences, Teare describes something she is curious about and she hopes readers will be curious about—the popularity of the Harry Potter books.

In the fifth sentence, Teare asks the question she will try to answer in the rest of the essay.

Finally, in the last sentence, Teare offers a partial answer to her question—her thesis.

The July/August 2001 issue of *Book* lists J. K. Rowling as one of the ten most influential people in publishing. She shares space on this list with John Grisham and Oprah Winfrey, along with less famous but equally powerful insiders in the book industry. What these industry leaders have in common is an almost magical power to make books succeed in the marketplace, and this magic, in addition to that performed with wands, Rowling’s novels appear to practice. Opening weekend sales charted like those of a blockbuster movie (not to mention the blockbuster movie itself), the reconstruction of the venerable *New York Times* bestseller lists, the creation of a new nation’s worth of web sites in the territory of cyberspace, and of course the legendary inspiration of tens of millions of child readers—the Harry Potter books have transformed both the technologies of reading and the way we understand those technologies. What is it that makes these books—about a lonely boy whose first act on learning he is a wizard is to go shopping for a wand—not only an international phenomenon among children and parents and teachers but also a topic of compelling interest to literary, social, and cultural critics? I will argue that the stories the books tell, as well as the stories we’re telling about them, enact both our fantasies and our fears of children’s literature and publishing in the context of twenty-first-century commercial and technological culture.

In the final two sentences of the introduction, Teare raises her question about the root of this “international phenomenon” and then offers her thesis. By the end of the opening paragraph, then, the reader knows exactly what question is driving Teare’s essay and the answer she proposes to explain throughout the essay.

■ The Paradoxical Introduction

A **paradoxical introduction** appeals to readers’ curiosity by pointing out an aspect of an issue that runs counter to their expectations. Just as an interrogative introduction draws readers in by asking a question, a paradoxical introduction draws readers in by saying, in effect, “Here’s something completely surprising and unlikely about this issue, but my essay

will go on to show you how it is true.” In this passage from “‘Holding Back’: Negotiating a Glass Ceiling on Women’s Muscular Strength,” sociologist Shari L. Dworkin points to a paradox in our commonsense understanding of bodies as the product of biology, not culture.

In the first sentence, Dworkin quotes from a study to identify the thinking that she is going to challenge.

Notice how Dworkin signals her own position “However” relative to commonly held assumptions.

Dworkin ends by stating her thesis, noting a paradox that will surprise readers.

Current work in gender studies points to how “when examined closely, much of what we take for granted about gender and its causes and effects either does not hold up, or can be explained differently.” These arguments become especially contentious when confronting nature/culture debates on gendered *bodies*. After all, “common sense” frequently tells us that flesh and blood bodies are about biology. However, bodies are also shaped and constrained through cumulative social practices, structures of opportunity, wider cultural meanings, and more. Paradoxically, then, when we think that we are “really seeing” naturally sexed bodies, perhaps we are seeing the effect of internalizing gender ideologies—carrying out social practices—and this constructs our vision of “sexed” bodies.

Dworkin’s strategy in the first three sentences is to describe common practice, the understanding that bodies are biological. Then, in the sentences beginning “However” and “Paradoxically,” she advances the surprising idea that our bodies—not just the clothes we wear, for example—carry cultural gender markers. Her essay then goes on to examine women’s weightlifting and the complex motives driving many women to create a body that is perceived as muscular but not masculine.

■ The Minding-the-Gap Introduction

This type of introduction takes its name from the British train system, the voice on the loudspeaker that intones “Mind the gap!” at every stop, to call riders’ attention to the gap between the train car and the platform. In a **minding-the-gap introduction**, a writer calls readers’ attention to a gap in the research on an issue and then uses the rest of the essay to fill in the “gap.” A minding-the-gap introduction says, in effect, “Wait a minute. There’s something missing from this conversation, and my research and ideas will fill in this gap.”

For example, in the introductory paragraphs to her edited collection of published essays, *Transforming the City: Community Organizing and the Challenges of Political Change*, professor of political science and urban studies Marion Orr calls attention to the “decline of civic engagement” and misplaced priorities in the United States.

In the first paragraph, the author provides a review of research that serves as a backdrop for stating the problem. The author then underscores a trend (the issue) that has concerned many different observers and that has had unfortunate consequences for people who have the greatest needs. Invoking the voices of other writers, she reminds us of the importance of contextualizing other perspectives in our writing.

The author then offers a possible strategy to address the issue she raises at the end of the second paragraph.

There is considerable discussion and increasing concerns about the declining levels of civic engagement in the United States. A recent study produced by a group of scholars affiliated with the American Political Science Association (APSA) proclaimed that “American democracy is at risk” because Americans have turned away from public and civic life. Robert Putnam used the “bowling alone” metaphor to describe the decline in membership in civic organizations, fraternal groups, parent–teacher associations, Boy Scouts, and many other organizations. Theda Skocpol attributes part of America’s “diminished democracy” to the rise of professional advocacy groups. . . . According to the study sponsored by APSA, “Americans have turned away from politics and the public sphere in large numbers, leaving our civic life impoverished.”

Most observers agree that the decline of civic engagement and the hijacking of locally rooted organizations are not good news for the United States and that the problem is magnified and implications far-reaching in the country’s central cities. Stephen Macedo and his colleagues point to metropolitan areas and their central cities as places “where the most serious challenges to healthy democratic life are also found.” With higher concentrations of low-income and disadvantaged residents, cities are disproportionately hurt by civic disengagement. . . . Is there a strategy that could address many of the social and economic challenges facing central cities and help reinvigorate civic engagement in urban communities? This book explores community organizing as just such a strategy.

Orr uses this two-paragraph introduction to highlight what she finds problematic about increasing “civic disengagement” by ordinary citizens, as opposed to “top-down organizations, and the lack of focus on populations that most need access to resources.” She also raises a question that implicitly asks readers how they might approach the problem, if they agree there is one, and introduce readers to her own approach.

■ The Reframing Introduction

Reframing a discussion provides a new perspective that others may have overlooked. Often reframing involves defining a word or phrase in a new way or creating a new term to offer a lens through which to challenge an idea, concept, or experience that others have written about. Naming something is also memorable and can have a powerful influence on the

ways readers see an issue. Consider how Noliwe Rooks, author of four books and director of American Studies at Cornell University, reframes a familiar narrative of inequality in American public education.

The author begins her introduction by calling attention to how historical inequities in school funding are influenced by race and class.

The road necessarily traveled to achieve freedom and equality in the United States leads directly through public education. For American citizens who are neither white nor wealthy, the journey has often been twisted and turned before leading back to the beginning, exposing stark tensions between racial and economic integration as an educational strategy and the strategy that champions separate but equal schools as America's ideology of choice. Since the earliest days when tax-supported public education was conceived and implemented, there have been intractable tensions between how economics, or race—or both—determine the funding, form, and purpose of education in America. . . .

The author follows this brief historical overview by coining a word, "segrenomics," to reframe the ways readers think about race, class, and inequality in education.

It is then not surprising that students educated in wealthy schools perform well as measured by standard educational benchmarks. Students educated in poor schools do not. While there have been times in our nation's history when we have acknowledged the damage inflicted by separate educational systems on our constitutionally enshrined rights of citizenship, with few exceptions we have found little incentive to commit ourselves to integrating both halves of this literal and figurative schoolhouse. Racial and economic integration is the one systemic solution that we know ensures the tide will lift all educational boats equally. However, instead of committing to educating poor children in the same way as we do the wealthy, or actually *with* the wealthy, we have offered separate educational content (such as reoccurring vocational education for the poor) and idiosyncratic forms of delivery (such as virtual charter schools and cyber education) as substitutes for what we know consistently works. While not ensuring educational equality, such separate, segregated, and unequal forms of education have provided the opportunity for businesses to make a profit selling schooling. I am calling this specific form of economic profit *segrenomics*.

The author is strategic in setting up the narrative and using the word "however," to force readers to pause and reconsider past solutions ("Racial and economic integration is the one systemic solution") to a persistent problem. Reframing separate and unequal schooling as "segrenomics" serves the author's purpose of describing what she sees as exploitation (opportunity for businesses to make a profit selling schooling). Thus she shifts the conversation from one that centers on school funding to a broader problem that readers need to know about.

Steps to Drafting Introductions: Six Strategies

- 1** Use an inverted triangle. Begin with a broad situation, concept, or idea, and narrow the focus to your thesis.
- 2** Begin with a narrative or scenario. Capture readers' imagination and interest with a story that sets the stage for your argument.
- 3** Ask a question that you will answer. Provoke readers' interest with a question, and then use your thesis to answer the question.
- 4** Present a paradox. Begin with an assumption that readers accept as true and formulate a thesis that not only challenges that assumption but may very well seem paradoxical.
- 5** Mind the gap. Identify what readers know and then what they don't know (or what you believe they need to know).
- 6** Reframe the conversation. Describe an idea, concept, or experience that is familiar to most readers and use a framing concept to name and redirect the focus on an issue that others may have ignored or overlooked.

A Practice Sequence: Drafting an Introduction

- 1 Write or rewrite your introduction (which, as you've seen, may involve more than one paragraph), using one of the six drafting strategies discussed in this chapter. Then share your introduction with one of your peers and ask the following questions:
 - To what extent did the strategy compel you to want to read further?
 - To what extent is my thesis clear?
 - How effectively do I draw a distinction between what I believe others assume to be true and my own approach?
 - Is there another way that I might have made my introduction more compelling?

After listening to the responses, try a second strategy and then ask your peer which introduction is more effective.

- 2 If you do not have your own introduction to work on, revise the introduction below from a student's essay, combining two of the six drafting strategies we've discussed in this chapter.

News correspondent Pauline Frederick once commented, "When a man gets up to speak people listen then look. When a woman gets up, people look; then, if they like what they see, they listen." Ironically, the harsh reality of this statement is given life by the ongoing controversy