

Week Twelve: Introductions and Conclusions

Introduction: Why are we discussing introductions and conclusions at the *end* of the semester? Shouldn't this have come *first*?

What's an essay for? Some would say that the essay is primarily a vehicle for presenting arguments. For some who define the essay's value in these terms, the essay is understood to have three parts: the introduction, the body, and the conclusion. When we were in school, one popular way of defining the function of each of the essay's parts was to say that the introduction is where you say what you're going to say, the body is where you say it, and the conclusion is where you say what you said. To our way of thinking, defining the essay in this way focuses the act of writing on repetition: say what you're going to say, say it, say what you said. Essays of this kind don't go anywhere; they just keep returning to the same point over and over again.

We have put off discussing introductions and conclusions till this point in the semester because we know that introductions and conclusions tend to arise fairly late in the composing process, after a good deal of exploratory writing has already occurred. In other words, it's after you've figured out which idea is the most significant one to focus on that you're in a position to draft an introduction to your thoughts; and, it's after you've seen where your thoughts lead that you're in a position to write a conclusion that does more than say, "I have proven what I set out to prove."

We'd like you to think of your first and last paragraphs as ways of welcoming your readers into your thinking process. By this point in the semester, you won't be surprised to learn that what we offer below is a set of questions to help you work on your own writing.

Introductions

What's the question or problem or issue that you've been thinking about? What have you used to help you think about this question or problem or issue? It is the function of the introduction to respond, in one way or another, to these questions.

Often instructors ask students to explain in their introductions why an issue is significant and this, in turn, can seem like a requirement to make overly grand claims about the global importance of what's under discussion. We suggest that you aim, instead, to use your introduction as a place to orient your readers to the issues, terms, and positions that your essay is most concerned with. To do this, try to include the following four elements in your introduction:

- Defining the issue/stating the problem: What concepts are in question? What ideas or values are at stake?
- The key terms required to understand the issue: What are the terms that are central to understanding the issue and your position?
- The resources you used to begin thinking about the issue: What essays are you using to consider the issue? What information have you relied on to make sense of the issue?
- An overview of your own position and the new terms and concepts you add to the discussion: How do you initially position yourself in relation to the terms of the discussion provided by the essays?

Conclusions

Conclusions can be the most intimidating part of the essay to write because it would seem that this is the place where your thinking about the issue under discussion comes to a close. When the conclusion is understood in these terms, it seems important to make grand claims about what has happened in the body of your paper. We think that it is more useful, though, to think of the conclusion as the place where many different kinds of work can be carried out. You might think of your conclusion as a place where you:

- State a new question that has been raised by your discussion of the issue or problem.
- State the ramifications of responding to the problem or issue in one way rather than another.
- State where the discussion of the issue or problem might have to go next, given the analysis provided by your paper.
- Offer a suggestion about how the problem or issue that you've discussed might be resolved.
- Point to other kinds research that has been done or could be done to better understand the issue or problem.

No matter which choice you make about how to use your conclusion, your goal for this part of your paper should be to establish the benefits of thinking about the issue or problem in the ways that you have. Your goal, in short, should be to answer clearly and unambiguously the “so what” question discussed in Week Ten.

Summary

You can only know where your paper is going and what the value of going in that direction is *after* you've done a fair amount of thinking, writing, reading, re-reading, and revising your thoughts about the issue under discussion. Once you've done all this work during the drafting process, you are in a good position to generate the writing that will go at the beginning and at the end of your draft: this writing, in turn, will summarize for your readers what the issue is that you're discussing and why your approach to this issue deserves attention.