

Strategies for Introductions and Conclusions

An introduction for a 3-5 pp. paper should be 5 – 7 sentences (at least) that lead up to a one or two sentence thesis. Make your introduction interesting; use it to get the reader's attention and/or to provide the initial focus for the topic. The following are the ways professional writers do it. The lists below can also be used for concluding paragraphs. Nothing is duller than the standard "tell 'em what you're going to say, say it, then tell 'em what you said" approach to writing. Open strongly; close strongly. Write energetically, forcefully, intelligently. Don't be a lazy writer.

Use judgment in the type of intro. or conclusion you write. The techniques below do not all work equally well for all situations.

Note: for longer papers, longer introductions/conclusions may be necessary. These strategies should provide you with a basic framework, whether longer or shorter.

From Diane Hacker, *Rules for Writers* (20-21):

Most of these suggestions will work better for the personal opinion or personal experience essay.

- a startling statistic or unusual fact
- a vivid example
- a description
- a paradoxical statement
- a quotation or a bit of dialog
- a question (same as a rhetorical question—i.e., one to which the answer is obvious, or you're going to answer it; note: your thesis can never be a question. It is a thesis *statement*.)
- an analogy
- a joke or an anecdote

Smallenburg (*Survival Guide*):

- a history of the problem or issue (very useful for the typical research or discussion paper; the in-depth discussion often includes this)
- quote an authority as your starting point; this might be someone you either agree or disagree with (a good example is Marvin Harris's reference to Ruth Benedict in the prologue to *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches*); similarly, very useful for the research or discussion paper)
- place your discussion in some larger context (excellent choice for research/discussion)

- an outrageous statement (not necessarily the same as Hacker's paradoxical statement); this is more useful for the personal opinion or experience essay than for an essay that has objectivity as its desired tone.

By the way, don't assume that the two lists above are entirely separate, just because they're two different lists. Which approach you take will depend on the circumstances, or the writing situation and audience. For example, the second set will work better for classroom papers. But if you want to sound professional, find ways to incorporate techniques from the first list as well. These are the techniques good writers use. You can, too.

Some examples of these strategies:

1. history of the problem or issue (you can often get this directly from the writer's discussion)

Reading Marvin Harris's account of Consciousness III in *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches*, it is clear that a major cultural conflict had arisen by the 1970s in America. On the one hand, by that time science and technology had made great achievements in transportation, communication, and medicine, and American business had helped to create the most materially satisfying lifestyle nearly anywhere in the world. However, these triumphs were not without their negative side. While science and technology had provided great material well-being, they had also brought about a deterioration of the natural environment because of pollution, and they had created weapons capable of destroying the human race. These failures brought about a reaction against not only science, but all forms of logic, rationality, and objective analysis, the methods upon which science and technology depend. Instead, large groups of people began to look back to older, non-rational lifestyle models for a sense of the deeper spiritual values that seemed to be lost. Harris's purpose in *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches* is to oppose this trend. He defines this new movement, which its proponents refer to as "Consciousness III," exposes its philosophic weakness, and lets the chapters of his book represent the potential of rational, objective analysis to solve problems of cultural behavior, showing at the same time that cultures where such rational analysis is missing end up suffering disasters and enduring or committing atrocities.

Example #2: startling statistic, unusual fact (again, the information comes directly from the reading assignment).

Five hundred thousand people, mostly women, were executed during the period from about 1480 AD to the 16th century. Their alleged crime was "witchcraft." Before the executions, they were tried and tortured to get the truth of their illicit relations with the devil and attendance at secret meetings, to which they were supposed to have flown on broomsticks. Marvin Harris, in *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches*, describes a number of

such shocking cultural episodes in order to make a serious point about what he sees as a dangerous tendency in modern society: the rise of hostility to rational, objective, scientific thinking. Harris describes and critiques a form of modern ignorance and superstition in the movement which regards itself as “Consciousness III” and offers the various discussions of cultural puzzles as proof both of the understanding a scientific, objective, analytic approach can create, and the huge disasters that can result from failure or inability to think logically and rationally.

Example #3: placing the discussion in some larger contemporary context

The “culture wars” are with us today: the conflict between people whose mindsets lead them to reject the evidence of science in such issues as the origins of the universe and man, or to reject the recommendations of psychologists and social scientists in favor of a strict and often counter-productive morality they believe is commanded by religion. So, instead of a healthy, informative sex education program in the schools, those whose religious views are very strict prefer that abstinence-based education be the standard and no information about artificial methods of birth control be available. Marvin Harris’s *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches* was written several decades ago, but its central intention is directly related to today’s social issues. Although Harris’s concern is not religion itself, many of his chapters have to do with religious beliefs, how they developed, and what they led to. His immediate concern is to define a movement—“Consciousness III”—that claims to be an enhancement of the spirit but is also a campaign against science and scientific methods such as logic and analysis. Harris critiques Consciousness III and shows, through the various chapter discussions, how the enigmas of many cultural behaviors can be understood by means of objective analysis, as well as how cultures that lack scientific awareness and processes of thinking suffer disasters and atrocities.