

8 The Introductory Paragraph

The first paragraph in an essay is called the introductory paragraph. Without an introductory paragraph your essay seems too abrupt to an American reader. You need to lead the reader into the subject of the essay. In addition, there is so much written material in the United States that readers will not feel compelled to read what you have written unless you manage to show them in the first paragraph that the essay will be interesting and worth their time to read. As a result, the purpose of the introductory paragraph is two-fold: to introduce the subject of the essay to the readers, and to get their attention.

There are four main types of introductory paragraphs. Let us consider the different ways in which you can introduce the topic “harmful effects of divorce on society.”

A. BRIEF ANECDOTE

An anecdote is a short story which illustrates your topic. You can either write this anecdote from your own experience, or you can invent a story concerning someone else. Here are two examples:

Personal Anecdote

My parents divorced when I was in elementary school. This divorce disrupted my childhood and adolescence in serious ways. Indeed, even today it is difficult for me to admit that my parents are divorced. If divorce has so deeply affected one person, consider the harmful effects divorce must be having on society as a whole.

Third Person Anecdote

The little girl woke from a nightmare. She ran to her parents’ room to see her father so he could comfort her. Then she suddenly remembered that he was no longer living with her. Her parents were divorced. She began to shake and cry. Divorce has greatly affected this child. Consider the harmful effect divorce seems to be having on society as a whole.

B. INTERESTING/SURPRISING FACT OR STATISTIC

Another way in which you can introduce your essay is by surprising the reader with facts or numbers. This kind of introduction is especially effective when you have exact figures at your disposal. You can expand your knowledge of facts and statistics by careful reading of newspapers and journals. Here is an example introducing the essay with facts.

Of every four couples who marry in the United States, one will seek divorce. In some urban areas, the figure is even higher: as many as half the marriages in the Los Angeles area end in divorce. This means that there is an increasing number of single-parent households and of children living without one of their parents. *Consider the harmful effects divorce seems to be having on society.*

C. HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

You may also choose to write a brief historical introduction to your essay. Naturally, you are not expected to begin with the beginning of time, but you may write a few sentences giving some historical background to your subject.

One hundred years ago, an unhappy couple simply lived unhappily or tried to work out their problems. Divorce was an option that was never considered. Today, an unhappy couple easily decides that divorce is the answer to their problems. *However, consider the harmful effects these "easy" divorces seem to be having on society.*

D. GENERAL TO SPECIFIC

This is perhaps the most common type of introduction. It begins with a general statement of the larger topic and subsequently narrows it down with each following sentence to the thesis statement. Below is an example of such a "general to specific" introduction.

Any society has many problems. The society in the U.S. is no exception. Some of the problems that the people in the U.S. must deal with are drugs, unemployment, welfare, and the generation gap. However, the basic problem is the changing structure of the family, which causes an overwhelming number of divorces. *Consider the harmful effects divorce is having on the people in the U.S.*

As you can see, all of the above paragraphs could introduce this essay, which would describe in several paragraphs what these "harmful effects" are. In your writing, you should try to develop the skill of writing different types of introductions, so your essays do not become boring and predictable.

Good introductory paragraphs of all types must naturally be relevant to the topic; that is, they should not introduce material not covered in the essay. Secondly, there should be a few sentences before the thesis statement. Finally, an introductory paragraph should not bring up the points which will form the body of the essay.

Exercise 1

Here are two thesis statements introduced by four paragraphs each. In groups or pairs, try to determine which of the four introductions you think are good, which ones not so good, and why you make this decision.

Thesis Statement A

1. You must plan a party if it is going to be a success. First you need to consider people who are likely to enjoy each others' company, and then you should send out invitations well in advance. In addition, don't forget to have plenty of good music available; people of all ages like to dance. *You can be a great party-giver if you plan in the following way.*

Is this a good introduction? _____

If it isn't, why not? _____

2. Who doesn't like a party? Yet I think everyone has given a party once that just wasn't a success. Great parties don't just happen; they have to be planned, and this takes some time. However, planning a party is worth the time and energy it takes. *You can be a great party-giver if you plan in the following way.*

Is this a good introduction? _____

If it isn't, why not? _____

3. There are all kinds of fun things to do in your leisure time. Participating in sports is probably the most common leisure activity. Sports train your body, teach you to win and lose with a smile, and help you concentrate. For most people, though, being with other people is what they enjoy most. *You can be a great party-giver if you plan in the following way.*

Is this a good introduction? _____

If it isn't, why not? _____

4. Parties are exciting and stimulating. *You can be a great party-giver if you plan in the following way.*

Is this a good introduction? _____

If it isn't, why not? _____

Thesis Statement B

1. Sports have beneficial effects on your health, but they can also be dangerous. Tennis players develop painful “tennis elbows,” skiers break their legs, and careless surfers may drown. *Swimming is the simplest and healthiest sport in which people of all ages can participate.*

Is this a good introduction? _____

If it isn't, why not? _____

2. There are all kinds of sports in the world. One distinction we can make is between individual and team sports. Some examples of individual sports are jogging, swimming, and badminton. Team sports are played by a group of people, usually against another team. In the United States, the best known of all these team sports are baseball, basketball, and football. All these sports are fine, but *swimming is the simplest and healthiest sport in which people of all ages can participate.*

Is this a good introduction? _____

If it isn't, why not? _____

3. When I was a child, I was quite fat. Our family doctor advised my parents to try to find a kind of sport that I would like so I could get the exercise I needed, but they soon found out that I was too short for basketball, too uncoordinated for tennis, and too slow for track. Then one day my grandmother took me to the local pool and went swimming with me. I loved it! I will never be a competitive swimmer, but I have gone to that pool twice a week ever since and so has my grandmother. *Swimming is the simplest and healthiest sport in which people of all ages can participate.*

Is this a good introduction? _____

If it isn't, why not? _____

4. Finding a sport that you can continue for life is not easy. You need something that doesn't cost much, that requires little equipment, and that won't be too tiring when you get older. I would like to recommend my favorite sport, recreational swimming. In fact, *swimming is the simplest and healthiest sport in which people of all ages can participate.*

Is this a good introduction? _____

If it isn't, why not? _____

Exercise 2

Here is a table showing the number of Americans who have died in the wars that the U.S. has fought. Use the statistics from this table to write an introduction to the given thesis statement. Remember that the thesis statement should go at the end of the introductory paragraph.

Thesis Statement

The Civil War was the worst war in U.S. history.

War	No. of Soldiers	Battle Deaths	Percent
Revolutionary War (1775-1783)	250,000	6,824	2.7
War of 1812 (1812-1815)	286,730	2,260	.8
Mexican War (1846-1848)	78,718	1,733	2.2
Civil War (1861-1865)	2,213,363	140,414	6.3
Spanish-American (1898)	806,760	385	.1
WW1 (1914-1918)	4,743,826	53,513	.1
WW2 (1941-1946)	16,353,659	292,131	1.7
Korean War (1950-1953)	5,764,143	33,629	.6
Vietnam War U.S. involvement: (1961-1973)	8,744,000	47,321	.5

Exercise 3

Practice writing introductory paragraphs with one of the following thesis statements. Write at least two introductory paragraphs for the thesis statement you choose. Remember that you can introduce a thesis statement by the use of anecdotes (personal or third person), surprising facts or statistics, historical information, or going from general ideas to specific ones.

1. Japanese cars are better than American cars.
2. A computer is easy to use if you follow these five steps.
3. Washington, D.C. is an interesting place to visit. (Or use a city in your country.)
4. Three experiences in my life have been very frightening.
5. A traditional marriage ceremony in my country is quite fascinating.

Exercise 4

Below is an essay about Diane Sawyer, a broadcast journalist. It does not have an introductory paragraph. Read the essay and then write an appropriate introductory paragraph with a good thesis statement.

Life of a Broadcast Journalist

The first part of Sawyer's career began in Louisville, Kentucky. She worked as a weather reporter and part-time news reporter for a local ABC station. She didn't know much about weather reporting, so she tried to make this part of the news more interesting by reading poems which she thought were appropriate. She liked the news reporting part of her job and tried to do well there, too. All in all, it was a good beginning.

The second part of Sawyer's career took her away from the TV spotlight. She moved to Washington, D.C. and became an assistant to President Nixon. She wrote press releases and speeches for the President. Later on, after Nixon resigned, Sawyer went to California with his staff and helped him write his memoirs. After that project was finished, she moved on.