The Shape of Introductions

Many writers struggle with getting their papers started. They stare at the blank computer screen and wonder where to even begin. It might help you get writing by thinking of your introduction in terms of its shape.

What? An introduction has a shape? Absolutely—and that shape is an upside down triangle. This means that any introduction is going to start broadly and then work its way to a specific point.

It is good to remember that the main goal of an introduction is to prepare readers for your thesis. We do this by first letting them know the broad subject matter of our papers. This puts the paper’s audience in the right frame of mind for what will come next.

As the triangle begins to narrow, so, too do you want to narrow your topic. How you do this depends on the subject. You might, for instance, provide some context for what you are writing, background information, or define important terms. You can also use a strategic quote, a startling statistic, or relay an anecdote that illustrates a main aspect of your paper. The key is to preview your argument and hone in on its thesis. A thesis, after all, is the point of your paper. It also happens to be the point of the triangle.

Students often struggle with the proportions of their introductions. If you start too narrowly, then your paragraph is only a few sentences long and doesn’t provide a good preview of your argument. If you do not narrow the introduction enough, readers will be confused when the thesis seems to jump out of left field.

Look at this sample introduction below:

Primates like monkeys, orangutans, and gorillas are mammals that generally live in large social groups. Often, these animals are observed practicing social grooming within those groups. Primates are animals that use social grooming primarily to create and strengthen social bonds.

There is a clear thesis here (i.e., “Primates are animals that use social grooming primarily to create and strengthen social bonds”) but it comes a mere two sentences after the paper’s opening. The introduction thus provides little context for the subject, and the speed with which the thesis is introduced might give readers whiplash. They are simply not ready to dive into the paper on the basis of this opening paragraph.

Now look at this sample introduction:

Observing groups of primates, whether at a zoo, in the wild, or even while watching a television documentary, is an experience that has delighted untold numbers of people. Primates like monkeys and lemurs are popular draws at zoos, where crowds gather to watch them scamper about and play. Primates are animals that use social grooming primarily to create and strengthen social bonds.

Unlike the previous example, this introduction more broadly sets up the paper’s subject matter so that readers start to understand what the paper might be about. But then it jumps very quickly from the context to the thesis, leaving readers again confused about what the paper will say.

Let’s look at one last sample introduction:

Observing groups of primates, whether at a zoo, in the wild, or even while watching a television documentary, is an experience that has delighted untold numbers of people. Primates like monkeys and lemurs are popular draws at zoos, where crowds gather to
watch them scamper about and play. Yet what zoo-goers might observe as play is really an important part of society-building for these animals. Primates like monkeys, lemurs, orangutans, and gorillas are mammals that generally live in large social groups. Because of this, it is important that they establish community ties and learn to work together. One way that they do this is through social grooming. While it may seem that social grooming is merely a way to rid themselves of pesky insects, ticks, and mites, primates mainly use social grooming to create and strengthen social bonds that help the group to function better as a unit.

Here the author introduces the broad topic of the paper, exciting readers from the first sentence. Then the topic narrows to talk about how primates work together. It narrows still further by specifying the paper’s topic: the uses of social grooming. Correctly, it ends on a defendable thesis that acts as a statement of conclusion.

The next time that you struggle to write an introduction, take a step back and recall that it should start broadly and become more specific. After all, the most shapely introductions hook readers and provide both a foundation and a blueprint for papers. Remember this: in writing, as in life, a good start is a very good thing.

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