

Writing Creative Introductions

The following introductory paragraphs come from various works, by writers with many diverse styles. While reading through the examples, think about what is effective in the introductions based on the following criteria:

- Who is the likely audience? Young people? General readers? Sports enthusiasts? The academic community? Do you think the introduction will appeal to the audience?
- What personality does the writer project? Does the author sound intelligent, bland, humorous, superior, knowledgeable, sarcastic? Is the author's tone suitable for the subject and audience?
- Is the introduction interesting? Informative? Does it lead smoothly into the paper?

1. Start with a dramatic incident

It was all very hush-hush. In the winter of 1973 a top official of the National Cancer Institute flew from Washington, D.C., to Oakland, California, carrying in his briefcase five plastic flasks. Growing in a milky film at the bottom of each flask were live tumor cells. The cells came from cancer patients in five different medical centers in the Soviet Union. In the spirit of détente Russia had given the cells to American scientists, who hoped they might contain new clues to the cause of cancer.

--Michael Gold, "The Cells That Would Not Die"

2. Start by telling a story

I have long looked for an opportunity to pay a certain debt which I have owed since I was seven years old. Debts are usually burdens, but this is no ordinary debt, and it is no burden, except as the feeling of warm gratitude may ache in one until it is expressed. My debt is to an Englishman, who long ago in China rendered an inestimable service to a small American child. That child was myself and that Englishman was Charles Dickens. I know no better way to meet my obligation than to write down what Charles Dickens did in China for an American Child.

--Pearl Buck, "A Debt To Dickens"

3. Start with a contrast

City people are more supple than country people, and the sanest city people, being more tested and more broadly based in the world of men, are the sanest people on earth. As to honesty, though, or good sense, no clear-cut distinction exists either way.

--Edward Hoagland, "Thoughts on Returning to the City After Five Months on a Mountain Where Wolves Howled"

4. Start by setting the scene

The last inch of space was filled, yet people continued to wedge themselves along the walls of the store. Uncle Willie had turned the radio up to its last notch so that youngsters on the porch wouldn't miss a word. Women sat on kitchen chairs, dining-room chairs, stools, and upturned wooden boxes. Small children and babies perched in every lap available and men leaned on the shelves or on each other.

--Maya Angelou, "Hope"

5. Start with a question

How many of you have ever wondered where certain slang expressions come from? Like "She's the cat's pajamas," or to "Take it on the lam." Neither have I. And yet for those who are interested in this sort of thing I have provided a brief guide to a few of the more interesting origins.

--Woody Allen, "Slang Origins"

6. Start with a description

Niagara Falls is a city of unmatched natural beauty; it is also a tired industrial workhorse, beaten often and with a hard hand. A magnificent river--a strait really--connecting Lake Erie to Lake Ontario flows hurriedly north, at a pace of a half-million tons a minute, widening into a smooth expanse near the city before breaking into whitecaps and taking its famous 186-foot plunge. Then it cascades through a gorge of overhung shale and limestone to rapids higher and swifter than anywhere else on the continent.

--Michael Brown, "Love Canal and the Poisoning of America"

7. Start with unusual facts and figures

There are 435 members of the House of Representatives and 417 are white males. Ten of the others are women, and nine are black. I belong to both of these minorities, which makes it add up right. That makes me a celebrity, a kind of side show attraction. I was the first American citizen to be elected to Congress in spite of the double drawbacks of being female and having skin darkened by melanin.

--Shirley Chisholm, "Unbought and Unbossed"

8. Start with a definition

I regard gifted children as those who possess some quality or innate ability which has been recognized and identified by any number of testing and observation devices and who manifest interest and success in either physical, intellectual, or artistic pursuits.

--Kenneth Mott, "Group the Gifted"

These examples are by no means the only ways to create an interesting and creative introduction to your writing. Other examples can include starting with a brief historical background, saying something startling or unexpected, using a quotation, or by explaining your thesis. Remember to gear your writing toward your intended audience, avoid clichés, and make sure you're getting your point across clearly.

It always helps, too, to have someone else read over your work, so that you can get an outside perspective on what you have written. The entire purpose of the introduction is to grab the reader's attention, and set the tone of the paper. If it's interesting to you and whoever is reading your drafts, there's a good chance it will be interesting to others. If it comes across as boring or uninteresting to both of you, odds are that's how it will seem to others.

Source: O'Hare, Frank, and Dean Memering. The Writer's Work - A Guide To Effective Composition 3rd ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990.