

# Powerful & Engaging Essay Openers

## Approaches to Writing Introductions and Techniques Professional Writers Use

adapted from <http://www2.ivcc.edu/rambo/eng1001/introductions.htm> and <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/intros.htm>

Type	Example
<p><b>Begin with Background or Historical Information</b></p> <p><i>Some topics are better understood if a brief historical review of the topic is presented to lead into the discussion of the moment. Such topics might include "a biographical sketch of a war hero," "an upcoming execution of a convicted criminal," or "drugs and the younger generation." It is important that the historical review be brief so that it does not take over the paper.</i></p>	<p>Identity theft is not a new crime. Throughout history, unscrupulous individuals have pretended to be people they are not, often with the goal of political, social, or financial gain. With the right appearance and demeanor, people have falsely presented themselves as kings and bishops. Today, in our information age, identity theft is a far more prevalent problem. With access to names, Social Security numbers, and other personal information, thieves are able to steal identities, leaving the victims struggling to clear their good names. Identity theft is a serious problem that claims millions of innocent victims, and the government must implement better regulations to help put an end to this crime.</p> <p>from "Integration Turns 40" by Juan Williams in <i>Modern Maturity</i>, April/May, 1994.</p> <p>The victory brought pure elation and joy. It was May 1954, just days after the Supreme Court's landmark ruling in <i>Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas</i>. At NAACP headquarters in New York the mood was euphoric. Telegrams of congratulations poured in from around the world; reporters and well-wishers crowded the halls.</p>
<p><b>Begin with an Anecdote or Short Story</b></p> <p><i>An anecdote is a little story. Begin a paper by relating a small story that leads into the topic of your paper. Your story should be a small episode, not a full blown story with characters and plot and setting. One caution: be sure that your story does not take over the paper. Remember, it is an introduction, not the paper.</i></p>	<p>Joe Stevens was finally ready to purchase a home. He spent years putting money into a savings account, paid off his credit cards, and diligently paid every bill on time. Confident of his good credit rating, Joe visited the bank to inquire about a mortgage, but he discovered startling information: Joe defaulted on a home loan, had \$40,000 in credit card debt, and had a car repossessed for lack of payment. Joe Stevens, like many Americans, is a victim of identity theft. Instead of preparing to move into a new home, Joe began the long journey to restore his good name and to reclaim his identity. Identity theft is a serious problem that claims millions of innocent victims, and the government must implement better regulations to help put an end to this crime.</p> <p>from "Going, Going, GONE to the Auction!" by Laurie Goering in <i>Chicago Tribune Magazine</i>, 7/4/94</p> <p>Mike Cantlon remembers coming across his first auction ten years ago while cruising the back roads of Wisconsin. He parked his car and wandered into the crowd, toward the auctioneer's singsong chant and wafting smell of barbecued sandwiches. Hours later, Cantlon emerged lugging a \$22 beam drill-for constructing post-and-beam barns—and a passion for auctions that has clung like a cocklebur on an old saddle blanket. "It's an addiction," says Cantlon, a financial planner and one of the growing number of auction fanatics for whom Saturdays will never be the same.</p>

Type	Example
<p data-bbox="113 228 499 297"><b>Begin with an Interesting or Surprising Fact</b></p> <p data-bbox="113 345 632 724"><i>A surprising statement is a favorite introductory technique of professional writers. There are many ways a statement can surprise a reader. Sometimes the statement is surprising because it is disgusting. Sometimes it is joyful. Sometimes it is shocking. Sometimes it is surprising because of who said it. Sometimes it is surprising because it includes profanity. Professional writers have honed this technique to a fine edge.</i></p>	<p data-bbox="699 191 1976 415">Identity fraud is the costliest crime in the United States. In 2004, over nine million Americans, or approximately one person in 24, became victims of identity fraud or identity theft, at a cost to the economy of 52.6 billion dollars ("2005 Identity Fraud Survey Report"). Because many cases of identity fraud and identity theft may go unreported, the numbers could be even higher. Identity theft is a serious problem that claims millions of innocent victims, and the government must implement better regulations to help put an end to this crime.</p> <hr/> <p data-bbox="699 488 1906 557">from "60 Seconds That Could Save Your Child" by Cathy Perlmutter with Maureen Sangiorgio in <i>Prevention</i>, September, 1993:</p> <p data-bbox="699 605 1976 748">Have a minute? Good. Because that may be all it takes to save the life of a child—your child. Accidents kill nearly 8000 children under age 15 each year. And for every fatality, 42 more children are admitted to hospitals for treatment. Yet such deaths and injuries can be avoided through these easy steps parents can take right now. You don't have a minute to lose.</p>
<p data-bbox="113 833 533 901"><b>Begin with the Definition of an Important Term</b></p> <p data-bbox="113 950 646 1360"><i>In a paper that deals with a particularly specialized topic or a term your audience is unlikely to be familiar with, you can start your introduction by defining a central word or phrase. Do not use this if a definition will not add useful information. Starting an essay with a dictionary definition of a common word, for example, is a cliched and shallow practice that you should avoid. Instead, give a definition while hinting at the angle, focus or thesis of your paper. from classroom.synonym.com</i></p>	<p data-bbox="699 967 1986 1192">At its most fundamental, identify is "the condition of being oneself and not another," and when one is a victim of identity theft, the quality of "being oneself" distinct from all others is undermined. It therefore is no wonder that victims of identity theft often feel a deep sense of violation as they struggle to reclaim their good names. Identity theft is a serious problem that claims millions of innocent victims, and the government must implement better regulations to help put an end to this crime.</p>

Type	Example
<p><b>Begin with a Direct Quotation</b></p>	<p>In Shakespeare's <i>Othello</i>, Iago claims that he "who steals my purse steals trash / . . . But he that filches from me my good name / Robs me of that which not enriches him, / And makes me poor indeed" (3.3.157-161). Today, identity theft is a new way that thieves steal both the "purses" and the good names of innocent victims, and these thieves are enriching themselves at the expense of their victims. Identity theft is a serious problem that claims millions of innocent victims, and the government must implement better regulations to help put an end to this crime.</p>
<p><b>Begin by Citing a Famous Person Who is Relevant to the Topic</b></p>	<p>from "Dear Taxpayer" by Will Manley in <i>Booklist</i>, May 1, 1993</p> <p>The most widely read writer in America today is not Stephen King, Michael Chrichton or John Grisham. It's Margaret Milner Richardson, the Commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service, whose name appears on the "1040 Forms and Instructions" booklet. I doubt that Margaret wrote the entire 1040 pamphlet, but the annual introductory letter, "A Note from the Commissioner," bears her signature.</p>
<p><b>Begin by Declaring Your Topic Directly</b></p> <p><i>In this pattern, the writer simply dives into the topic of the paper. It is the technique that can be successfully used in academic essays, but good professional writers use it too.</i></p>	<p>from "The Tuition Tap" by Tim Lindemuth in <i>K-Stater</i>, February, 1994</p> <p>In the College of Veterinary Medicine and Engineering, for example, nearly one-third of the teaching faculty may retire by the year 2004. In the College of Education, more than a third of the professors are 55 years old and older. The largest turnover for a single department is projected to be in geology. More than half of its faculty this year are in the age group that will retire at the millennium, says Ron Downey of K-State's Office of Institutional Research and Analysis. The graying of K-State's faculty is not unique. A Regents' report shows approximately 27 percent of the faculty at the six state universities will retire by the end of this decade, creating a shortage of senior faculty. This shortage must be addressed to meet the needs of a forecasted wave of college freshmen.</p>

Type	Example
<p><b>Begin by Reversing Expectations</b>  <i>from</i>  <a href="http://grammar.about.com/od/il/g/Introductory-Paragraph.htm">http://grammar.about.com/od/il/g/Introductory-Paragraph.htm</a></p>	<p>from Roz Savage, "My Transoceanic Midlife Crisis." <i>Newsweek</i>, March 20, 2011</p> <p>In March 2006, I found myself, at 38, divorced, no kids, no home, and alone in a tiny rowing boat in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. I hadn't eaten a hot meal in two months. I'd had no human contact for weeks because my satellite phone had stopped working. All four of my oars were broken, patched up with duct tape and splints. I had tendinitis in my shoulders and saltwater sores on my backside.</p> <p>I couldn't have been happier. . . .</p> <p>from Keith Bradsher, "'Strategic' Goats Gobble Up Trade Subsidy." <i>The New York Times</i>, 2/26/93</p> <p>Here on a stony meadow in West Texas, at the end of 10 miles of unpaved road through mesquite-covered, coyote-infested scrub land, several hundred bearers of a strategic commodity of the United States of America are gathered.</p> <p>They are goats. . . .</p>
<p><b>Begin by Creating a Contrast</b></p> <p><i>One way to help a reader grasp the scope of your topic is to start with a position you disagree with. For example, you may state what a long-standing theory holds, then transition, with a word like "however" or "but," to describe the contrasting conclusions your research leads to. This technique is particularly useful in argumentative essays or if you will be presenting your paper in a setting where alternate conclusions will also be proposed.</i></p>	<p>The primary purpose of Foster Care service is to provide a safe temporary placement for children who cannot remain safely in the home of their parent or parents. The goal of foster care is to implement a plan for permanency for each child; however, this is never accomplished in most cases.</p>

<b>Tips for Your Introductions</b>	
<b>Type</b>	<b>Example</b>
<b>Write the introduction <u>after</u> you have written the body of your essay.</b>	Writers often sit down to an empty computer screen and struggle to write an introduction, and understandably so: they do not yet know what exactly it is that they are introducing. You should have a thesis statement in mind as you write an essay, but there is no reason to have to write the introduction before you begin writing the body paragraphs. It is often much easier to write an introduction when you can actually see what you are introducing.
<b>Avoid long introductions.</b>	Introductions generally are not long, certainly not longer than body paragraphs. Avoid going into depth developing ideas in the introduction. That's for the body paragraphs of an essay, not for the introduction. The primary purpose of an introduction is just to introduce your essay.
<b>Experiment with more than one type of introduction for the same essay.</b>	As the examples above illustrate, different introductions can give an essay quite a different tone. You might try writing a few different introductions, using the approaches above, and you could then choose the introduction that you think best fits your paper.

<b>Introductions to Avoid</b>	
Some approaches to introductions almost always fail to be interesting or engaging. Below are a few approaches to introduction that should be avoided. They are just about guaranteed to give an essay a weak beginning.	
<b>Type</b>	<b>Example</b>
<b>Avoid Beginning with Overly Vague and General Statements or Broad Generalizations</b>	Crimes are committed every day by different people, and there are many different kinds of crime. Some crimes are more serious than others. One serious crime today is identity theft. (Can you hear the readers already starting to snooze? The first two sentences to this introduction are far too vague and general to get anyone interested in what the writer is going to say in the paper.)
<b>Avoid Beginning with Dictionary Definitions Obvious to Readers</b>	According to <u>Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary</u> , the word "steal" is defined as "to take the property of another wrongfully." Identity theft is one form of stealing. (The writer of these sentences seems to assume that the readers are idiots, which is not a good impression to give readers. Who would not already know this definition of "steal"?)
<b>Avoiding Beginning with a Direct Statement of What You, as the Writer, are Doing</b>	In this essay, identity theft will be explained. I will discuss why it is such a big problem and what the government should do about it. (Such an introduction might be appropriate for a writer in junior high school, but mature writers use much more effective rhetorical strategies to begin their essays.)