Tips for Writing Interesting, Catchy, Persuasive Introductions

Introductions can be tricky—and can often hang up the process of drafting or revising a paper. Rather than staying stuck, try to work through the challenges of writing an introduction by keeping in mind these suggestions for getting started (adapted from Writing With Style, by John R. Trimble).

1. Brainstorm before you start to write to make sure that you have a strong topic for your paper. A topic is the general idea or focus of your essay, but is NOT the thesis statement of the paper. As you make a list of all the ideas related to your topic, begin to formulate your thesis by taking some detailed notes. Complete the sentence: “I contend/argue/claim that....” Once you complete this sentence, look at it and think about whether or not, if you saw this thesis in another person’s paper, it would be interesting—would it intrigue you enough to read further? Then consider if it is complex enough to allow for lengthy and indepth exposition. Check this thesis against the quotes/evidence you found from the text that you intend to use in your paper. Do they match up? Finally, make sure you lead off your paper with an intro and thesis that are concrete and specific in their detail. Don’t be vague, and avoid generalizations.

2. After you complete the process above, you might find that you are still stuck—or that you have to start over again and again. Take a step back, stop writing, and talk through your ideas. Ideally, you would do this by telling someone else about your paper and its thesis, but you can just talk aloud and say what you mean as well. If you still feel stuck, but know that the thesis idea you’ve selected is what you want to write about, move on to the next paragraph and continue writing. Sometimes second paragraphs end up stronger introductions, and you might find that this is the case after you’ve drafted.

3. Write in simple, natural prose—but avoid slang and colloquialism as much as possible. Find your voice and your rhythm and work with that. Multi-syllabic, “big,” or theoretical words don’t necessarily make you sound smarter or more knowledgeable. Often, complicated prose is just confusing, and the use of jargon can be distracting to the reader. Let your strong, precise, clear, and interesting ideas be what dazzles your reader. You can always go back to your intro later and add or change words to make the overall sense of your ideas sound more sophisticated.

4. Introductions should be (as Trimble says) “full-bodied.” Intros that are only a few sentences long can point to problems in the paper—your readers may think you are short on ideas. On the other hand, you don’t want to include everything from your essay—all its ideas, possible topic sentences, etc.—in the introduction. The intro should be a well-balanced presentation of the main idea of your paper—your thesis—and this thesis should be complex and specific enough so that your paper’s sub-claims (topic sentences/ideas) are easily distinguished as related to it.
5. Consider opening your intro with a brief but “dramatic” sentence—perhaps a bold assertion that you make with a few simple words. You might also begin with something that you find surprising about a text (and want your readers to see it as such).

6. Organize your introduction so that the biggest punch—the strongest statement of your thesis—comes at the end. Such an organization, says Trimble, has “three advantages: it lets you build towards a climax; it gives you great entry into your next paragraph, because of the springboard effect; and it saves you from repeating yourself. Repetition can be a real problem in intros when we find ourselves with the tendency to merely restate our main point over and over without any real progression of the thesis towards a logical and interesting concluding statement.

7. Use what Trimble calls the “front-door” approach to writing introductions versus the “back-door” approach. Good openers are not only well-written (in that they sound good) but also use concrete details that work to set up a precise, interesting, and logical thesis statement. Boring and/or “empty” openers may mimic a good opener, in that the intro seems to sound good (with its use of grammar, style, etc.), but really end up saying nothing at all (or repeating the same thing over and over and over...). Here’s a back-door introduction, as an example:

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, admired for its poetic style and intriguing characters, has remained a classic for over three centuries. The character of Hamlet is probably one of Shakespeare’s most perplexing and most pleasing. He is easily identified with because of his multi-faceted personality and his realistic problems.

In contrast, a front-door intro is specific, interesting, and leads the reader towards a logical connection of ideas:

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, the servant is really a lord, and the lord’s wife is really a page, and the schoolmaster is really a suitor, and the crazy suitor is really a wise old fox, and the perfect beauty is really a shrew, and the shrew is really a perfect wife, and things are not as they seem. Even the play itself pretends not to be a play by putting on a production within a production. In it, three characters are being duped by this rampant role-playing. By the examples of Sly, Kate, and Bianca, Shakespeare acquaints us with the effects of wealth, love, and power, respectively, and shows how the emergence of an inner (perhaps truer) character can be said to have been tamed. However, the “taming” occurs only as a result of the manipulation of the supposers by the posers. Moreover, while things are not as they seem because of the dual-rolled characters, neither does the “taming” suggested by the title ever take place.