

Introductions:

The following are various methods for introducing a paper and examples of those methods. The examples and methods are taken from the Behrens & Rosen Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum with occasional editorial comments from A. Greenwood.

Historical Review:

In many cases, the reader will be unprepared to follow the issue you discuss unless you can provide some historical background. Consider the following introduction to an essay on the film-rating system:

Sex and violence on the screen are not new issues. In the Roaring Twenties, there was increasing pressure from civic and religious groups to ban depictions of “immorality” from the screen. Faced with the threat of federal censorship, the film producers decided to clean their own house. In 1930, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America established the Production Code. At first, adherence to the Code was voluntary; but in 1934 Joseph Breen, newly appointed head of the MPPDA, gave the Code teeth. Henceforth, all newly produced films had to be submitted for approval to the Production Code Administration, which had the power to award or withhold the Code seal. Without a Code seal, it was virtually impossible for a film to be shown anywhere in the United States since exhibitors would not accept it. At about the same time, the Catholic Legion of Decency was formed to advise the faithful which films were and were not objectionable. For several decades the Production Code Administration exercised powerful control over what was portrayed in American theatrical films. By the 1960’s, however, changing standards of morality had considerably weakened the Code’s grip. In 1968, the Production Code was replaced with a rating system designed to keep younger audiences away from films with high levels of sex or violence. Despite its imperfections, this rating system has proven more beneficial to American films than did the old censorship system.

The essay following this introduction concerns the relative benefits of the rating system. By providing some historical background on the rating system, the writer helps readers to understand his or her arguments.

Review of a Controversy:

A particular type of historical review is the review of a controversy or debate. Consider the following introduction:

The American Heritage Dictionary’s definition of civil disobedience is rather simple: “the refusal to obey civil laws that are regarded as unjust, usually by employing methods of passive resistance.” However, despite such famous (and beloved) examples of civil disobedience as the movements of Mahatma Gandhi in India and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States, the question as to whether civil disobedience should be considered an asset to society is hardly clear cut. For instance, Hannah Arendt, in her article, “Civil Disobedience,” holds that “to think of disobedient minorities as rebels and truants is against the letter and spirit of a constitution whose framers were especially sensitive to the dangers of unbridled majority rule.” On the other hand, a noted lawyer, Lewis Van Dusen, Jr. in his article “Civil Disobedience: Destroyer of Democracy,” states that “civil disobedience, whatever the ethical rationalization, is still an assault on our democratic society, and affront to our legal order and an attack on our constitutional

government.” These two views are clearly incompatible. Of the two, Van Dusen’s is the more convincing. On balance, civil disobedience is dangerous to society.

The negative aspects of civil disobedience, rather than Van Dusen’s essay, are the topic of this essay. But to introduce this topic, the writer has provided quotations that represent opposing sides of the controversy over civil disobedience, as well as brief references to two controversial viewpoints. By focusing at the outset on the particular rather than the abstract aspects of the subject, the writer hoped to secure the attention of his or her readers and to involve them in the controversy that forms the subject of the essay.

Anecdote, Illustration:

The following is an example of the use of an anecdote or illustration in an introduction:

In late 1971, astronomer Carl Sagan and his colleagues were studying data transmitted from the planet Mars to the earth by the Mariner 9 spacecraft. Struck by the effects of the Martian dust storms on the temperature and on the amount of light reaching the surface, the scientists wondered about the effects on earth of dust storms that would be created by nuclear explosions. Using computer models, they simulated the effects of such explosions on the earth’s climate. The results astounded them. Apart from the known effects of nuclear blasts (fires and radiation), the earth, they discovered, would become enshrouded in a “nuclear winter.” Following a nuclear exchange, plummeting temperatures and pervading darkness would destroy most of the Northern Hemisphere’s crops and farm animals and would eventually render much of the planet’s surface uninhabitable. The effects of nuclear war, apparently, would be more catastrophic than had previously been imagined. It has therefore become more urgent than ever for the nations of the world to take dramatic steps to reduce the threat of nuclear war.

This introduction goes from the specific (scientists studying data) to the general (the urgency of reducing the nuclear threat). The anecdote is one of the most effective means at your disposal of capturing and holding the reader’s attention.

Question:

Frequently, you can provoke the reader’s attention by posing a question.

Are gender roles learned or inherited? Scientific research has established the existence of biological differences between the sexes, but the effect of biology’s influence on gender roles cannot be distinguished from society’s influence. According to Michael Lewis of the Institute for Study of Exceptional Children, “As early as you can show me a sex difference, I can show you the culture at work.” Social processes, as well as biological differences, are responsible for the separate roles of men and women.

Opening your essay with a question can be provocative since it places the reader in an active role: He or she begins by considering answers.

Be careful not to ask questions that your paper does not answer. In addition, you will want to avoid asking questions that are easily answered (“Should we punish murders?”) and thereby seem to insult the reader’s intelligence.

Statement of thesis:

Perhaps the most direct method of introduction is to begin immediately with the thesis:

Computers are a mixed blessing. The lives of Americans are becoming increasingly involved with machines that think for them. "We are at the dawn of the era of the smart machine," say the authors of a cover story on the subject in Newsweek, "that will change forever the way an entire nation works," beginning a revolution that will be to the brain what the industrial revolution was to the hand. Tiny silicon chips already process enough information to direct air travel, to instruct machines how to cut fabric-- even to play chess with (and defeat) the masters. One can argue that development of computers for the household, as well as industry, will change for the better the quality of our lives: computers help us save energy, reduce the amount of drudgery that most of us endure around tax season, and make access to libraries easier. Yet there is a certain danger involved with this proliferation of technology.

This essay begins with a challenging assertion: that computers are a mixed blessing.

Be aware that the statement of the thesis in this introduction example is rather broad. A bit more of an indication as to what this "certain danger" is would be more effective.