

Introductions & Conclusions



Why are intros and conclusions so hard?

The basics of introductions and conclusions are easy: an introduction should “introduce” your ideas, your argument, what you’re talking about; a conclusion wraps up your essay so it feels “finished.” But the complexities of what those things actually mean for revised, analytic, argumentative, academic essays are much tougher. Here are a few ideas that may help.

Introductions: What do readers expect to see at the beginning of the essay?

- Convey the major content of your essay: name authors and texts, define any significant words or phrases (in terms of your essay and how you use them), set up key issues and concepts, announce questions or problems your essay answers or addresses—and include your answer/address/hypothesis, since that’s your thesis.
- Suggest how these major content elements are connected in your essay; the transitions between sentences and ideas are a good place to do this, as is your thesis (which will, in theory, tie all these elements together somehow).
- Communicate a rough sense of the logical progression of your essay—your reader should be able to roughly outline your essay based on your intro*; you can do this by organizing your introduction concepts in the same basic order as your essay, or in your thesis—but be wary of the formulaic, list-y thesis, which can sound clichéd.

Conclusions: What do readers expect to see at the end?

- Recapitulate or synthesize your argument—do not repeat; your reader should NOT be able to outline your essay by reading your conclusion.
- Recapitulating means summarizing the main points and how they connect to each other—this part of the conclusion should not be more than a sentence or two, and should acknowledge coming from the previous paragraphs—you and your reader should be on the same page.
- Explain where the conversation is now that your essay is part of it: what does your reader now know, how have those questions or problems from the intro been refined or redirected?

*Not for a paper reporting primary research, which will instead have clearly labeled sections for Methods, Results, Discussion, and Conclusion.

How can I meet my readers' expectations?

- After finishing the draft of your paper, do a post-draft outline to capture what you actually said and how it unfolded—writing out your ideas in a full draft will usually lead you somewhere a little different (and hopefully more interesting) than you initially planned. Use the pdo to make sure your intro sets up all the elements that actually were relevant in your essay, and nothing that you ultimately didn't explore.
- Transition into your conclusion from the last body paragraph so it doesn't feel tacked on.
- Murder your darlings: this often applies to “throat-clearing” at the beginning of an intro—sweeping generalities that got you started on the draft, but aren't really needed for your reader—and “purple prose” in the conclusion—beautiful but superfluous philosophizing on your way out of the essay.
- Watch for choppiness—reading aloud can help catch this. Lack of transitions in the intro usually signals ideas whose relationships are not clearly stated on the page, and in the conclusion, usually signals too much summary of the essay.
- Watch for repetitiveness—reading aloud can help catch this. In the intro this usually signals connected ideas whose specific connection is unclear or distinct ideas whose difference is not clearly stated; in the conclusion, this usually signals that the significance of the essay is not clearly stated.

Resources for further reading

For more detailed information on introductions: Inspired Introductions

For more detailed information on conclusions: Cinematic Conclusions

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