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Have you ever had the experience of reading something that you just couldn’t put down? Do you remember that feeling of being captivated by the first words, of being completely drawn into the text from the get-go, and then thinking about the content long after you finished? Good writing in general can have that effect on readers, but without a strong introduction or conclusion, you will never engage readers the way you need to.

**Introductions** and **conclusions** are typically the more challenging parts of a paper to write — and for good reason! The introduction “introduces,” that is, it sets up the parameters for the discussion and prepares readers for what follows. The conclusion brings the piece of writing to a close; it offers thoughtful analytic commentary based on what came earlier in the discussion. No wonder writing introductions and conclusions are difficult to write: They depend on everything that comes in between — all of the content! For most writers, composing the beginning and ending should be done after the body paragraphs have been developed. The writer will need some direction for writing in order to compose substantive body paragraphs, and to this end, a working thesis and/or informal outline will probably do the trick.

Introductions and conclusions are important also because they are the first and last impressions readers get. If your introduction or conclusion does not make the right impression, this may reflect unfavorably (and perhaps unfairly) on the entire essay.

**Introductions**

Introductions set the stage for what is to follow in a piece of writing and are critical in preparing readers for the discussion. Without a proper introduction, readers may not be able to make sense of the content. While you may write the introduction at any point in your process, you may find it easier to write after the paper is completed when you are more certain of what you want to say. Regardless, the introduction will probably change somewhat as you revise the paper and your focus and ideas get clearer and clearer.

**Characteristics of an Effective Introduction**

**Provides relevant background information.** Regardless of the topic, readers need a context to understand your remarks. A good introduction will include necessary information about the topic that readers need to understand the importance of the issue and why what you have to say about it matters. Readers want to feel grounded so that they can easily follow the development of the essay.
Engages the reader. A good introduction will capture the attention of readers so that they want to read the paragraphs beyond the introduction. Enough specific information is presented that readers are interested in the topic and what the writer plans to do with it. An engaging introduction invites readers into the world of the writing.

Sets the appropriate tone. The opening paragraph establishes the tone— the spirit and attitude behind the words— that the writer will use in a piece of writing. The tone should be a conscious choice as it reflects how the writer feels about the subject and about the audience, as well as the degree of formality of the writing. In most academic writing, the general tone is formal, but it may be more or less formal depending on the exact purpose of the writing. For example, a piece of writing with the purpose of introducing a new employee will probably be less formal and more personable than, say, a persuasive essay.

Establishes the focus and purpose. The introduction must make the focus and purpose of the paper clear to readers. Many writers include a thesis statement that establishes the focus and purpose, and forecasts the main points. Even if you do not use an explicit thesis statement, the focus and purpose of the paper need to be just as clear. If readers do not understand the focus or what the writer hopes to accomplish, subsequent paragraphs may not make sense to readers.

Options for Introductions

The following is a collection, by no means complete, of rhetorical strategies for writing introductions. Occasionally an introduction will have characteristics of more than one strategy, so you should treat this list as a compendium of possibilities, not as a prescription of how certain types of beginnings must look. A good approach to writing an introduction is to try out a number of options so that you get a sense of the possibilities. Don’t feel locked into any one strategy and recognize that writing an introduction often requires a process just like the rest of your writing. To this end, don’t feel you have to get the introduction right the first time. The more you work on your introduction and think about what you are trying to say in your paper as a whole, the better able you are going to be to write an effective introduction.

Establish the issue

In the last decade or so, American culture has become increasingly tolerant of teenage sexuality. Many parents, too busy in their lives, are not proactive in educating their teens on issues related to sexuality. Educators are often left with the role of providing basic information about the subject even as more and more sexual education classes are cut from the curriculum. Where does this leave curious teens? Statistics show that 75 percent of teens have had sex by the time they are nineteen years old. The teenage birth rate continues to climb as do reported cases of sexually transmitted diseases (Healy, 2008). Clearly, it is imperative to develop
intervention programs that teach adolescents the effective skills in delaying early sexual behaviors. Early education on delaying sexual activity for teens can drastically decrease teenage pregnancies, prevent the spread of STDs, and help teens to make the right choices that can impact the rest of their lives.

Pose one or more questions
Did you ever think that your life would change dramatically in a matter of twenty-four hours? One day you have a certain kind of life—a home, nearby schools for your kids, a wonderful neighborhood, good job, friends—and the next day it was all gone, irreversibly changed. As a resident of New Orleans, Louisiana, I had always known that a major hurricane could strike, but even knowing this fact could not prepare me for what happened in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Hurricane Katrina demonstrated the need for residents to evacuate when mandated, for local and state authorities to work more efficiently together, and for the federal government to respond in a timely and responsible manner.

Use a narrative
It was a dark and stormy night. The wind whipped through the trees while lightening flashed and thunder boomed. Up ahead on a hill, a rickety old house stood. In an upstairs window, a single, solitary light shone, casting an eerie shadow across the yard. I was in Chattanooga, Tennessee, on business, and was driving to the outskirts of the city to visit my aunt, an old woman I hadn’t seen in nearly twenty years. According to my directions, that rickety old house was my aunt’s house, but I didn’t know if I had the nerve to knock on the door. In fact, I couldn’t remember a time I had been more scared. Everyone experiences fear just as everyone experiences happiness or sadness. Fear is a natural human emotion to the unknown and is characterized by physical changes to the body, an innate need to escape, and acute awareness of one’s surroundings.

Use an attention-grabbing statement
Some children cannot sit still. They appear distracted by every little thing and do not seem to learn from their mistakes. These children disregard rules, even when they are punished repeatedly. It’s simple—their parents must not know how to control them. The truth is that attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder or ADHD is not understood appropriately. In fact, ADHD is a growing problem that requires more research to understand the issue, better intervention programs to help afflicted children, and improved training and support programs to help parents and educators.

Use an extended example or series of brief examples
According to the Federal Highway and Transportation Agency, the majority of Americans, some 57%, do not regularly wear seat belts (2008). Teddy Biro didn’t wear one when the car he was driving skidded on an icy road and hit a utility pole; Biro was catapulted through his front windshield and died of blood loss from a severed jugular vein. The coroner reported he had no
other injuries besides minor abrasions. Bob Nettleblatt wasn't wearing a seat belt when a car rear-ended him at a stop sign. Nettleblatt slammed his head into his front windshield and required 137 stitches to close up the laceration; investigators at the scene said if he had been wearing a seat belt, he would have been virtually unhurt from the 2 mph rear end collision (Fischer, 2007). Despite what is known about the safety of wearing seatbelts, too many Americans still do not buckle up, resulting in enormous emergency medical costs and fatalities that could be avoided. Despite what some people think, wearing a seatbelt is not a choice nor does it violate one's personal rights. Wearing a seatbelt is the law and more needs to be done to enforce the law, punish those who break it, and educate young drivers to the dangers of not buckling up.

Define an essential term
My friend George is a record fiend. Every room of his house contains floor-to-ceiling shelves filled entirely with record albums organized alphabetically regardless of genre. Stack after stack of record albums are piled high in the center of rooms, in corners, in hallways. They are stacked under tables and in cupboards. One entire closet contains by George’s estimation over twenty-five hundred unsorted albums he purchased at flea markets, estate sales, and record shows. The parts of walls exposed contain framed original album covers—the Beatles’ Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band, Muddy Waters’ Electric Mud, John Coltrane’s Giant Steps. He owns commercially released albums, limited edition releases, reviewer copies, test pressings, and bootlegs. On most weekends, George travels to record shows and collectors conventions. He writes a weekly blog devoted to obscure records and another on the art of record collecting. His obsession with record collecting has cost him jobs, friends, and a wife. And still he collects.

Dramatize a scene
4 AM, March 28, 1979 and the floor of the control room at Three Mile Island nuclear power station jumps to life. The two control room operators are jolted from their mid-shift doldrums as alarms begin to sound and the pounding in the auxiliary room is deafening. What those at the station did not know was that the "worst crisis yet experienced by the nation’s nuclear power industry" (Kemeny, 1979, p. 37) had just begun, and its impact wouldn't be realized for years to come, if ever.

Three Mile Island nuclear power station was located on an island in the middle of the Susquehanna River near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. It contained two separate nuclear power plants, TMI 1 and TMI 2. TMI 1 had been shut down for maintenance, but TMI 2 was operating at 97% of rated power providing electricity to the area (Carraway, 2000). Within seconds of the first alarm, a chain of events would commence to destroy the nuclear reactor and with it, the future of the nuclear power industry in this country.

Use a quote (direct or indirect)
An observer once said that New Orleanians are either having a party, recuperating from a party, or planning a party. The biggest and best party of all and the city’s most famous celebration is Mardi Gras, the greatest free show on earth. Despite the image the popular media displays to
outsiders, Mardi Gras is a yearly celebration that is much tamer than most realize, brings family and friends together, and promotes unity among diverse groups of people.

**Use a shocking statement or shocking statistic(s)**

McDonald’s has sold over 100 billion burgers. One hundred billion burgers with bun, stacked on top of one another would extend over 2.9 million miles into space—twelve times as far as the moon (Grimes, 2007). What is the secret of McDonald’s incredible success? To use the words of Ray Kroc, McDonald’s founder, the secret to McDonald’s success is that the fastfood giant produces “consistently mediocre food” (Thomas, 2001). The McDonald’s corporation has become a model of success due to its understanding of its market niche, its ability to redefine its image over time, and its ability to remain stable and produce a profit even in difficult economic times.

**Conclusions**

At the other end of the essay is its conclusion, or ending. For many writers, endings tend to be more difficult to write than beginnings, so you may need to put in some extra effort to make sure your ending works. Ernest Hemingway, the great 20th century American writer, claimed to have written 256 different endings for his short novel *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Why? According to Hemingway, he needed to get it right. While you may not have the time to try so many different endings to the conclusion you write, do keep in mind what Hemingway clearly knew: For a conclusion to be successful, it needs to be satisfying. No one likes to invest time in anything if there isn’t some kind of payoff at the end. An ending that is not satisfying is like watching a fireworks display with no grand finale. Good endings create a sense of closure, a sense that the business of the essay has come to a completion; the reader is not expecting more.

When you write your conclusion, keep in mind that it is your last chance to reach your readers, so be sure your final words leave a lasting impression. While the tendency is to offer a summary of what came before, an effective conclusion will move beyond a mere summary and bring the writing to a thoughtful and graceful exit.
Characteristics of an Effective Conclusion

Brings the writing to a logical close
A conclusion provides the necessary signal to readers that the business of the essay is winding down and the reader is being returned to the world outside of the essay. This transition should be fluid and the parting content thoughtful so that readers are prepared for and satisfied with the ending.

Reinforces the main idea in an engaging manner
Just as the introduction provides a first impression, the conclusion provides the last impression. The conclusion should reinforce the main idea of the work but do so in a way that is fresh and not merely a perfunctory rehashing of what the essay discussed. Use the ending as your last chance to reach your audience and make sure the main point, its significance, and/or its larger implications are understood.

Leaves readers with something to think about
Ideally, a conclusion will bring the world of the essay to a close in such a way that even though the business of reading has ended, the audience does not stop thinking about what the essay said—its ideas. You don’t want an audience to end reading an essay, thinking “So what?” Provide some content that engages readers with what is important about the topic and your discussion of it so that the meaning of the writing stays with readers.

Options for Endings
What follows is a list of possible ways to conclude your writing. Depending on the purpose of the writing, some endings are more appropriate than others, so give careful thought to these techniques and try out a number of appropriate possibilities. Please also keep in mind that these options, like the offerings for introductions, can be combined so that a conclusion may have characteristics of more than one type of ending.

Most of the options for introductions can also be used for conclusions as well. Recall all the introduction in which the writer was telling the story of the dark and stormy night he went to visit an aunt he hadn’t seen in decades. The conclusion could pick up where the introduction left off, or it could tell the story of another fearful situation the writer experienced, but the same general technique, a narrative in this case, could be used.

What follows is a list of additional ways in which you can compose a conclusion for your writing.
The echo
The idea of the echo is to repeat keywords or phrases to create an “echo” that gets at a particular meaning or emphasizes a certain idea important to the writing. In the example below, note how the repetition of “Too many drivers” emphasizes the idea and, in essence, creates an echo readers will hear.

Too many drivers act in inappropriate ways when they get behind the wheel of a motor vehicle. Too many drivers are unnecessarily aggressive, darting in and out of traffic, running stop lights, putting everyone else on the road in peril. Too many drivers are just plain inconsiderate as if they are the only ones on the road. And too many of those drivers are just like you and me – good, decent people until we get in our cars.

Audience appeal
The writer shows or points out directly to the audience how things are or the likely consequences if certain conditions remain the same. The content is presented in such a way that the burden of responsibility lies with the audience. This approach is well suited for writing that has a persuasive purpose.

The current political culture allows for staggering sums of money to be spent on campaigns. The basic idea is not so much about content as it is about getting the word out and creating a buzz. The more one hears about a candidate, the greater the buzz. And, of course, creating a buzz costs money, but, as advertisers have known for a long time, it is money well spent. Getting elected is a lot like selling laundry detergent, and until American citizens let their governmental advertisers know that they’ve had enough, that spending millions of dollars – even if it’s a candidate’s own money – to hold an office is ludicrous, then they have no one but themselves to blame.

State the so what
With this ending, the writer essentially states the deeper meaning of the piece of writing so that the idea is not only clear, but it is also emphasized. Today, Maine is one of only ten states that has not passed public charter school legislation. Maine’s current public school choice offerings are slim at best. Current choices include only traditional public schools or private schools. Whether the reason for wanting other alternatives is personal or educational, Maine families should be afforded another choice in public education. It’s time for Maine to recognize that public charter schools are a valuable choice in free public education.

Clinching statement
A thought-provoking final statement that communicates the essence of the piece of writing and stays with readers.
For most residents living in hurricane-prone New Orleans, the first of June simply marks the beginning of another local season—hurricane season. The media quickly saturate the airwaves with hurricane season predictions, hurricane preparedness reminders and checklists, evacuation routes and guidelines, mini-lessons on the benefits of super Doppler imagery, and, certainly up until Katrina, doomsday predictions of what could happen if a major hurricane hit New Orleans. The information delivered was such standard fare that few gave it much thought. Hurricane Katrina changed all that. Katrina taught New Orleanians to be mindful of hurricane season and to pay attention—really pay attention—to what was swirling out near or in the Gulf. And even though by meteorological standards, Katrina was not the Big One, the apocalyptic aftermath of the storm and the physical and psychological damage it caused added up to something far greater than anyone expected.

**Back to the beginning**

This ending uses content that in some way refers back to the beginning of the essay, not in a redundant way but in a manner that makes an important connection. While friends will drift in and out of our lives, disappearing and maybe reappearing, some will be as constant as the stars in the sky. These friends — the essence of true friends— we will keep forever. These few friends will always be around, will see us through thick and thin, good and bad, no matter what, because that is what true friends do.