

THE BASIC COMPONENTS OF AN ACADEMIC PAPER

. the introduction – the body – the conclusion .

I. The Introduction

People always seem to be afraid of the introduction. “HOW DO I START THIS PAPER?” is always the big question. The introduction is supposed to do exactly what it says it does—it introduces the reader to what you are going to talk about. It DOES NOT have to say everything you plan to do or accomplish in the paper. Neither does it have to make an argument right there. That comes later. Keep in mind the following:

- A. The introduction must contain a statement of the purpose of the paper. This is variously called the **thesis**, the **statement of purpose**, the **claim**, the **argument** and so on. They all mean the same thing; that is, the **goal** or **objective** of the paper.
- B. The statement of purpose does not have to be just one sentence. Sometimes explaining the goals of the paper takes several sentences or even a full paragraph. The longer the paper, the more likely that the statement of purpose will also be long.
- C. You do not have to make the introduction all beautiful and flowery. The most important thing is to be specific and clear. Worry about the language later. The main issue is to establish the paper's goal for both yourself and your reader.
- D. Sometimes it works very well to write out ONLY your statement of purpose—the idea you are working with—and go straight on into the paper. Then, when you've reached the end, make your conclusion the introduction. Very often what happens when you write a paper is that your ideas grow and develop—they may even change completely—as you write the paper so that the conclusion you reach is actually much better than anything you may have started with.
- E. Don't let yourself get bogged down by worrying over the intro. It's much smarter to start writing the body of the paper than to sit and freak about the intro. Just because it's the first part of the paper doesn't mean that you have to write it first.

more on the other side...

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II. The Body

This is the main—the BIGGEST—part of the paper. Sometimes it seems overwhelming. Just as with any big job, the best way to approach it is in smaller bits. Remember that any and every paper, no matter what the topic, is going to have a given number of things that need to be covered. Even though they all go together to form one whole, you can write about them individually and then tie things together later.

- A. Always make an outline. This might seem useless and boring but it will give you a structure. It's the skeleton on which you hang the flesh of the paper. One of the biggest problems people have with papers is organization and clarity. An outline will keep you on track and make it much easier to remember what it is you are trying to accomplish.
- B. Do not begin your paper thinking like this: "OK. If I write two paragraphs about this and three paragraphs about that, then it will be enough." It's better to NOT think in terms of paragraphs but in terms of whether or not you've proved the point you're working on. You can never really predict how long it will take for you to present your idea, discuss it, support it and move on. If you learned about the so-called FIVE PARAGRAPH structure in high school, be prepared to forget it. Almost no instructor on a university campus is going to be willing to accept that kind of paper.
- C. The body is where most of the work is accomplished. This is where you take up your topic/argument/idea and discuss it. This is where you examine all the angles, present evidence, quote sources and give your opinions. It is in the body that you should think of your reader and imagine yourself either trying to describe something to them or persuade them about something. It's much easier to write the paper if you have an audience in mind.

III. The Conclusion

Unlike the introduction, there isn't necessarily a specific purpose that a writer wants to accomplish in the conclusion. All we know is that we're supposed to conclude or end the paper, but there are many ways to do that. The most obvious way—and also the most boring—is simply to summarize. That's not a bad idea in and of itself, but there are other things to keep in mind.

- A. If you choose to summarize the body of the paper, restate your main idea or argument. This time make it short. Then briefly reiterate the *most important* points you've made. You don't have to restate all of them. Also, you don't have to summarize your evidence. It is basically only your own conclusions that you want to point out to the reader again.
- B. Consider discussing why the paper was important. Why is what you had to say significant? (TRUST YOURSELF—what you have to say is worthwhile even if you think the paper stinks.) Suggest to the reader other things that might be worth thinking about or other questions to consider. If it's a research paper, make suggestions about a further direction research might go based on what your paper has to say.
- C. Avoid using the phrase "In conclusion . . ." It's too obvious. You don't have to tell the reader that you are concluding. They should know it from the context because you will have made your position or argument clear all the way to the end. Besides, if it's the last page, it's going to be pretty obvious, eh?