21L.004 Reading Poetry

Spring 2009

Handout taken from: http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/introductions.html

Strategies for writing an effective introduction

- **Start by thinking about the question**. Your entire essay will be a response to the assigned question, and your introduction is the first step toward that end. Your direct answer to the assigned question will be your thesis, and your thesis will be included in your introduction, so it is a good idea to use the question as a jumping off point. Imagine that you are assigned the following question:
- *Education has long been considered a major force for American social change, righting the wrongs of our society. Drawing on The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, discuss the relationship between education and slavery in 19th-century America. Consider the following: How did white control of education reinforce slavery? How did Douglass and other enslaved African Americans view education while they endured slavery? And what role did education play in the acquisition of freedom? Most importantly, consider the degree to which education was or was not a major force for social change with regard to slavery.*
- You will probably refer back to this question extensively as you prepare your complete essay, and the question itself can also give you some clues about how to approach the introduction. Notice that the question starts with a broad statement, that education has been considered a major force for social change, and then narrows to focus on specific questions from the book. One strategy might be to use a similar model in your own introduction —start off with a big picture sentence or two about the power of education as a force for change as a way of getting your reader interested and then focus in on the details of your argument about Douglass. Of course, a different approach could also be very successful, but looking at the way the professor set up the question can sometimes give you some ideas for how you might answer it. Keep in mind, though, that even a "big picture" opening needs to be clearly related to your topic; an opening sentence that said "Human beings, more than any other creatures on earth, are capable of learning" would be too broad.
- **Try writing your introduction last**. You may think that you have to write your introduction first, but that isn't necessarily true, and it isn't always the most effective way to craft a good introduction. You may find that you don't know what you are going to argue at the beginning of the writing process, and only through the experience of writing your paper do you discover your main argument. It is perfectly fine to start out thinking that you want to argue a particular point, but wind up arguing something slightly or even dramatically different by the time you've written most of the paper. The writing process can be an important way to organize your ideas, think through complicated issues, refine your thoughts, and develop a sophisticated argument. However, an introduction written at the beginning of that discovery process will not necessarily reflect what you wind up with at the end. You will need to revise your paper to make sure that the introduction, all of the evidence, and the conclusion reflect the argument you intend. Sometimes it helps to write up all of your evidence first and then write the

introduction—that way you can be sure that the introduction matches the body of the paper.

- **Don't be afraid to write a tentative introduction first and then change it later.** Some people find that they need to write some kind of introduction in order to get the writing process started. That's fine, but if you are one of those people, be sure to return to your initial introduction later and rewrite if necessary.
- **Open with an attention grabber.** Sometimes, especially if the topic of your paper is somewhat dry or technical, opening with something catchy can help. Consider these options:
    1. an intriguing example (for example, the mistress who initially teaches Douglass but then ceases her instruction as she learns more about slavery)
    2. a provocative quotation (Douglass writes that "education and slavery were incompatible with each other")
    3. a puzzling scenario (Frederick Douglass says of slaves that "[N]othing has been left undone to cripple their intellects, darken their minds, debase their moral nature, obliterate all traces of their relationship to mankind; and yet how wonderfully they have sustained the mighty load of a most frightful bondage, under which they have been groaning for centuries!" Douglass clearly asserts that slave owners went to great lengths to destroy the mental capacities of slaves, yet his own life story proves that these efforts could be unsuccessful.)
    4. a vivid and perhaps unexpected anecdote (for example, "Learning about slavery in the American history course at Frederick Douglass High School, students studied the work slaves did, the impact of slavery on their families, and the rules that governed their lives. We didn't discuss education, however, until one student, Mary, raised her hand and asked, 'But when did they go to school?' That modern high school students could not conceive of an American childhood devoid of formal education speaks volumes about the centrality of education to American youth today and also suggests the significance of the deprivation of education in past generations.")
    5. a thought-provoking question (given all of the freedoms that were denied enslaved individuals in the American South, why does Frederick Douglass focus his attentions so squarely on education and literacy?)
- **Pay special attention to your first sentence**. Start off on the right foot with your readers by making sure that the first sentence actually says something useful and that it does so in an interesting and error-free way.
- **Be straightforward and confident**. Avoid statements like "In this paper, I will argue that Frederick Douglass valued education." While this sentence points toward your main argument, it isn't especially interesting. It might be more effective to say what you mean in a declarative sentence. It is much more convincing to tell us that "Frederick Douglass valued education" than to tell us that you are going to say that he did. Assert your main argument confidently. After all, you can't expect your reader to believe it if it doesn't sound like you believe it!

How to evaluate your introduction draft

Ask a friend to read it and then tell you what he or she expects the paper will discuss, what kinds of evidence the paper will use, and what the tone of the paper will be. If your friend is able to predict the rest of your paper accurately, you probably have a good introduction.

Five kinds of less effective introductions

1. The place holder introduction. When you don't have much to say on a given topic, it is easy to create this kind of introduction. Essentially, this kind of weaker introduction contains several sentences that are vague and don't really say much. They exist just to take up the "introduction space" in your paper. If you had something more effective to say, you would probably say it, but in the meantime this paragraph is just a place holder.

Example: Slavery was one of the greatest tragedies in American history. There were many different aspects of slavery. Each created different kinds of problems for enslaved people.

2. The restated question introduction. Restating the question can be an effective strategy, but it can be easy to stop at JUST restating the question instead of offering a more effective, interesting introduction to your paper. The professor or teaching assistant wrote your questions and will be reading ten to seventy essays in response to them—he or she does not need to read a whole paragraph that simply restates the question. Try to do something more interesting.

Example: Indeed, education has long been considered a major force for American social change, righting the wrongs of our society. The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass *discusses the relationship between education and slavery in 19th century America, showing how white control of education reinforced slavery and how Douglass and other enslaved African Americans viewed education while they endured. Moreover, the book discusses the role that education played in the acquisition of freedom. Education was a major force for social change with regard to slavery.*

3. The Webster's Dictionary introduction. This introduction begins by giving the dictionary definition of one or more of the words in the assigned question. This introduction strategy is on the right track—if you write one of these, you may be trying to establish the important terms of the discussion, and this move builds a bridge to the reader by offering a common, agreed-upon definition for a key idea. You may also be looking for an authority that will lend credibility to your paper. However, anyone can look a word up in the dictionary and copy down what Webster says— it may be far more interesting for you (and your reader) if you develop your own definition of the term in the specific context of your class and assignment. Also recognize that the dictionary is also not a particularly authoritative work—it doesn't take into account the context of your course and doesn't offer particularly detailed information. If you feel that you must seek

out an authority, try to find one that is very relevant and specific. Perhaps a quotation from a source reading might prove better? Dictionary introductions are also ineffective simply because they are so overused. Many graders will see twenty or more papers that begin in this way, greatly decreasing the dramatic impact that any one of those papers will have.

Example: Webster's dictionary defines slavery as "the state of being a slave," as "the practice of owning slaves," and as "a condition of hard work and subjection."

4. The "dawn of man" introduction. This kind of introduction generally makes broad, sweeping statements about the relevance of this topic since the beginning of time. It is usually very general (similar to the place holder introduction) and fails to connect to the thesis. You may write this kind of introduction when you don't have much to say—which is precisely why it is ineffective.

Example: Since the dawn of man, slavery has been a problem in human history.

5. The book report introduction. This introduction is what you had to do for your fifth-grade book reports. It gives the name and author of the book you are writing about, tells what the book is about, and offers other basic facts about the book. You might resort to this sort of introduction when you are trying to fill space because it's a familiar, comfortable format. It is ineffective because it offers details that your reader already knows and that are irrelevant to the thesis.

Example: Frederick Douglass wrote his autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, *in the 1840s. It was published in 1986 by Penguin Books. He tells the story of his life.*

Works consulted

All quotations are from Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, edited and with introduction by Houston A. Baker, Jr., New York: Penguin Books, 1986.

From: http://www.nd.edu/~writing/resources/TopicSentences.htm

Topic Sentences

What are they?

Never underestimate the power of the Topic Sentence. Having little or no focus to your paragraph, or with-holding the point of your paragraph until the end of the paragraph makes your essay seem like random babbling. You may have great ideas, killer words and concepts, but they are nothing without making your point clear. You will have a thesis for your paper. Topic Sentences derive from that thesis and are the supporting points that develop it.

Topic Sentences are like theses for your paragraphs. Each paragraph has a function, and so each paragraph must have a sentence that gives the paragraph direction, just as the thesis of your essay gives your essay direction. Usually they go at the beginning of your paragraphs, for the sake of clarity.

You should be able to read only your Introduction and the Topic Sentence for each paragraph - and be able to understand exactly how the argument unfolds

What do they do?

Topic Sentences verify and substantiate your thesis. One way to develop this habit is to use *key-terms* from your thesis in each of your Topic Sentences. This reminds the reader that they are on the right path, headed in the right direction, as well as where they have been and how they got where they are now. This need for clarity and connection makes those *transitional phrases* so crucial in developing Topic Sentences.

Topic Sentences should be in your own words. Topic Sentences should NEVER be someone else's words. While you need evidence to support every claim you make, it is your brilliance, and your brilliant ideas and thoughts that should lead (and close) every paragraph. This will also help your flow.

Topic Sentences should create a framework for the structure of your argument. If your thesis is a road-map for your essay, then Topic Sentences are like the signs along the freeway that tell you what's up ahead (in the paragraph) and, through careful organization, approximately when and what it will take to reach your destination (Conclusion).

Topic Sentences reflect your organization, so if you can't make a clear Topic Sentence, there's a pretty good change that your paragraph (and possibly your paper) needs re-thinking, and direction. One way of working with Topic Sentences is to create a Reverse Outline - an outline in which you write out your thesis, and follow that with the full and complete Topic Sentence for each paragraph, so that you can visually assess what needs re-organizing.

Sample Introductions

Not-so-good introductions:

If to love is to live, then to love and have that love ignored is to live a life filled with sorrow and doubt. Love is terrible and great and the worst is that it is unrelenting, no matter how indifferent its intended recipient may be. The American Heritage dictionary defines loves as: “a feeling of intense desire and attraction toward a person.” Sir Philip Sidney’s sonnet 31 from Astrophil and Stella is about the confusion and anguish that such a one-sided love causes. Sidney uses literary techniques in his poem to talk about this confusion and anguish of love.

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Throughout history, love has been defined as some sort of intense emotional attachment or affection. However, it must be seen as an epic battle between the heart and the mind. In sonnet 33 of Sir Philip Sidney’s Astrophil and Stella, the speaker describes the end of a constituent struggle.

Better Introductions:

In order for a poet to establish trust and a sense of purpose from his reader, he must establish a certain "sense of self." There are no limits on what type of speaker this "self" is derived from, (ie. the poet, a daughter, or an inanimate object) but it must be consistent and draw the reader into the poem. In many cases this "self" is a reflection of its writer. Two examples of this are Elizabeth Bishop's "In the Waiting Room," and Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (sections 1 and 24). In Bishop's poem, she adopts the persona of her six year old self and takes a journey through the waiting room of a Worcester, Massachusetts, dentist office. In contrast Whitman's "Song" is a celebration of his thirty seven year old self, all that he is and will become. Both poems exhibit a strong sense of the poets' personality which ultimately drives a journey of self discovery, and thrusts the reader deeply into the ideas of the poem.

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"I Saw in Louisiana a Live Oak Growing" by Walt Whitman and "One Art," by Elizabeth Bishop, are two differently structured poems concerned with diverse concepts and ideas. "I Saw in Louisiana a Live Oak Growing," is a free verse poem concerned with the speaker's fascination that a "live-oak" (1) can "utter joyous leaves" (16) "without a friend" or "a lover near," (16) something which he realizes "he could not [do]" (7). In "One Art," a villanelle, Bishop presents losing as an "art" (1) that can be "master[ed]," (1) but has trouble maintaining this stance when she must address "losing

you," (16) clearly referring to a lover. Although these two poems are concerned with different ideas and have vastly contrasting forms, both authors use a series of progressions dealing with structure, form, punctuation, and verb tense that serve to modify and extend the speaker's final conclusion. In "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing," Whitman uses these progressions to modify and strengthen his own speaker's conclusion, evolving from "I knew I could not" (7) to "I know very well I could not" (17). In "One Art," Bishop uses these same progressions to cast doubt on her speaker's initial conclusion rather than reinforce it, as she ultimately shifts from "the art of losing isn't hard to master" (1) to "the art of losing's not too hard to master" (18). Ultimately, both authors employ these same techniques to work for a common goal – to present an altered and more developed version of the speaker's opening ideas by the poem's end.