

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21L.007 World Literatures: Travel Writing  
Fall 2008

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.

# Writing introductions

*A good introduction can help you map out and focus what an essay will be about. (Titles can do this too). Bad introductions take up space but don't help you or the reader figure out what's coming next or why. Many papers look a bit like this:*

## **Intro:**

From the beginning of time,  $\alpha$  has been true/important/of interest to human beings. Author X & author Y both mention  $\alpha$  in their works.

## **Body:**

- Example  $\alpha$ 1
- Example  $\alpha$ 2
- Example  $\alpha$ 3

## **Conclusion:**

[Ack! How do I conclude? I don't know where to go, so even though it's kind of boring...:] As I have now shown, we see  $\alpha$  in these works of great genius by X and Y. OR 5. Though both authors write about  $\alpha$ , they do so using different approaches, and as a result, leave the reader with two distinct impressions.

*What is a writer to do? Here are some suggestions and observations.*

1. *It's hard to finish a good introduction before you have a draft of the paper. (Introductions usually need to be partially or wholly rewritten near the end of the writing process, once you know what you are introducing). Use it as a tool during the writing process to figure out the main question you want to ask and why that question is a question.*
2. *Once you know what you're introducing, try to introduce it right away. Do not resort to human history or the beginning of time.*
3. *You will need to make some general points in your introduction, using (for instance) broad concepts like "nature" and "nurture", "gender," "power", etc. These general, conceptual terms are 1/ important and 2/ dangerously vague and potentially monotonous if you leave them all alone without a little bit of concrete, specific detail to keep them company. For an example, see below.*

**Intro2:**

Author X and author Y both make  $\alpha$  central to their texts [titles follow] [etc.]. *This sentence does the job of introducing the topic right away, but it's kind of boring and also kind of vague. So here's my rewrite, letting  $\alpha$  = interpersonal relationships, X and Y = Milton [Paradise Lost, a poem based on the Genesis story of Adam and Eve's creation, temptation, and fall from Eden] and Defoe [Robinson Crusoe, a novel about a man who is shipwrecked on a desert island, alone until he rescues a native man who will become his servant and companion].*

**Intro3:**

For both Milton and Defoe, intimate relationships combine danger and trust. In *Paradise Lost*, Adam's love for his wife helps him decide to eat the forbidden apple, rather than remaining alone and sinless; Eve's love for her husband induce her to offer it to him rather than keeping it to herself. Love appears to override these two characters' impulses towards self-preservation and rivalry, yet the consequences are so terrible that we may question their decisions. By contrast, *Robinson Crusoe's* Friday and Crusoe begin their relationship at opposite ends of a gun, with every reason to fear each other. Yet the cannibal and the colonist end by finding "perfect" obligation and love together, pooling their resources to master the environment and its other inhabitants. Is it safe to love someone, or should self-interest be our guide? Milton and Defoe appear to offer different answers.

*Now the paper which follows has something to do which isn't trivial/obvious: how do Milton's and Defoe's text each answer this question? The intro may also give me some other questions to explore in the paper: e.g. what are Adam's feelings for Eve, and Eve's for Adam? How and why do Crusoe and Friday both let down their guard? Are these relationships really comparable, or are there differences which should be taken into account?*

**Conclusion3:** *Here, you would sum up what the answers alluded to the introduction are; distinguish between them as succinctly as possible; and note anything unexpected which came up in the course of the paper. (E.g., Adam and Eve lose everything through their love for each other, but Michael assures them that they will nonetheless find a "paradise within thee, happier far" than the Eden they left).*