

The Marble Foyer vs. the Smelly Mudroom *or, Writing an Inviting Introduction*

Your first paragraph is the occasion for introducing your crux and explaining why it is worthy of discussion. You should try to formulate your crux in a succinct sentence (or two), then you should explain why its resolution is essential to achieving an understanding of the novel, or the historical event, or the philosophical problem, or the social problem (depending upon what kind of essay you're writing!). The first paragraph is not the place to summarize the story, or list all the points of your argument. Unfold the argument as you go. Don't give the first paragraph a tone of finality—and laying all your cards on the table up front will do that.

The importance of introductory material works at the sentence level as well. Which of the following sentences is more interesting?

1. In a short paper, it is advisable to annoy readers with a long introduction.
2. Nothing annoys readers more than long general introductions to short papers.

Sentence 1 has several problems: no self-respecting verb, no real subject. But it also fails to draw the reader in because the beginning of the sentence doesn't DO anything—it's just a long line of little words. All the hard data clumps along at the end. Try to get something exciting at the beginning of your sentences, AND your essays. Generally speaking, the beginning and the end of a sentence should be the most...fulfilling. Of course, ALL parts of an essay should be invigorating.

Some possible ways to start an essay:

- Begin by setting up a problem (and go on to solve it).
- Begin with an unusual or surprising observation.
- Begin with a paradox (and then untangle it).
- Begin by describing the genesis of your idea.
- Begin by setting forth an idea you will alter refute.
- Begin with a pertinent quote, or juxtapose two quotes whose points you will then discuss.
- Begin with a question.
- Begin by opening up various possibilities for interpretation, and then go on to choose one of them and tell why it's the most interesting.
- Begin with an anecdote—a brief, engaging story that introduces the crucial themes of your argument.