

016 Composition 06 - The Writing Process: Introductions and Conclusions

What are Introductions and Conclusions, and What Do They Do?



Have you ever wondered, when hearing one of your friends tell a story, “So what? What is this story about, and what on earth does this have to do with me?” If you ever had this thought, chances are your friend failed to make the relevance of the story clear to you when she started telling it: in short, she failed to *introduce* the story and establish a sense of importance for it.

In more formal writing, such as you are required to do in English 101, the overall subject and point of the writing, and this sense of importance and relevance—a concept called *exigence*—is established by a strong and clear *introduction*.

Conclusions often serve to remind the audience of the *exigence* of the writing, reviewing the overall points that were made in the writing and ensure that the audience understands the importance and relevance of the writing in their lives.

The Functions of an Introduction

Any effective introduction to a piece of writing must accomplish the following main tasks:

- Provide *necessary background* details on the subject of the writing
- Establish a *sense of exigence and importance* for the subject
- Contain and *emphasize a clear and compelling thesis statement* for the piece of writing

Function 1: Providing Necessary Background

One of the primary tasks of any introduction is to make it clear to the reader the essay's topic, and what point of view will be used to approach that topic. This is perhaps the most straightforward and familiar task for any introduction: even the most basic, elementary-school level essays contain introductions that announce the topic. Consider the following:

There are many different types of trees native to Maryland. The beech, adler, birch, and Douglas fir are all present in various forests throughout the central and southern parts of the state. These are important natural resources and should be protected.

More advanced writing, however, requires more than a simple announcement of the topic: it should provide the audience with details that will enhance their understanding of that topic. Here's a revision of the above paragraph, with added background information added to clarify the writer's position on preserving native tree species in Maryland:

Over the past fifteen years, the major species of trees native to Maryland have been under threat. The beech, birch, adler, and Douglas fir, all of which are present in various forests throughout the central and southern parts of the state, are in danger of being eradicated by invasive tree and plant species, mainly from Asia and South America, such as the Purple Loosestrife and the Giant Hogweed. Because these native species are important natural resources for Marylanders, preserving them should be a high priority: these trees need to be protected.



Here the writer has selected and provided additional details for the reader: the types of native trees, their locations, the fact that they are under threat, and the source of the threat. The additional details help define the problem that the essay will address, namely the need for preservation of native Maryland trees.

Function 2: Establishing a Sense of Exigence

Exigence is the *sense of importance and relevance that your audience gets for a piece of writing*, the sense of urgency to think or act on a certain problem. In short, exigence answers the question “So What?” for the reader. Writing that lacks a sense of exigence may leave a reader feeling unfulfilled, or of having wasted his time reading the piece of writing.

Avoiding a Banal Topic

Establishing exigence is in part accomplished by *selecting a good topic*. The importance of a piece of writing like a process analysis or narrative of brushing one’s teeth or making a peanut butter and marshmallow sandwich is far more difficult to almost any audience due to its *banal* nature—subjects such as these are in general too common or “ordinary” to be truly compelling topics for a piece of writing that someone would actually want to read.



Exercise: Avoiding a Banal Topic

In the following list, identify the most compelling possible topic. Rate each on a scale from 1-10, with (1) being the most banal and (10) being the most compelling.

1. A narrative essay telling the story of a young Italian immigrant overcoming ethnic discrimination in 1940s New York City. Rating _____
2. A compare-contrast essay discussing the similarities and differences between onion bagels and sesame bagels. Rating _____
3. A process analysis essay describing the best method of peeling a potato. Rating _____

4. An argument essay advocating for the reform of health insurance regulations in Maryland. Rating _____
5. An essay comparing and contrasting two different hairdos. Rating _____
6. An essay telling the story of a party held off-campus last weekend. Rating _____
7. A compare-contrast essay examining two different anti-poverty efforts in Washington, D.C. Rating _____

Exigence as an Urgent Problem

In addition to selecting a compelling and interesting topic, establishing a strong sense of “so what?” for your writing can be accomplished by *reminding your audience of an urgent problem that they have, and positioning your writing as a solution to that problem*. This, of course, requires that you have a sense of the audience to whom you are writing, the values they hold, and the problems that they face. See Chapter 07, Rhetorical Skills, for an extended discussion on audience and for specific ways of discovering this kind of information.

Advertisements, which are in essence very short *arguments* for an audience to take a specific action—purchasing a product—often make use of this strategy, reminding their audience of a recurring problem or need in their lives—physical, psychological, emotional, or material—and suggesting that their product can solve that problem. Consider the following print advertisements: what problem does their audience have, and how does this product position itself to solve that problem?

Example 1:



Example 2:



Example 3:



Function 3: Emphasizing a Clear and Compelling Thesis Statement

Chapter 05.3.1 discusses creating effective thesis statements. This section will discuss where those thesis statements should be located in the introduction to an essay in order to achieve the most clarity and emphasis.

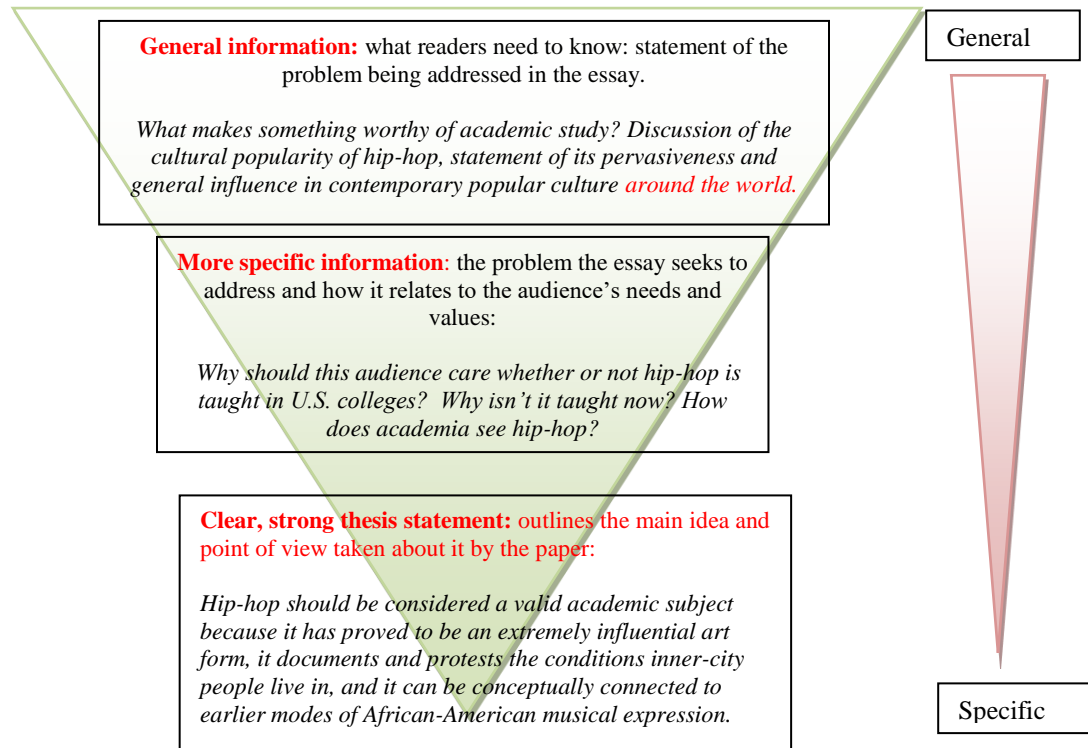
As a general rule, thesis statements should occupy the position of greatest emphasis in the introductory paragraph—this usually means *near the end, either the final or second-to-last sentence in the paragraph*.

Introductions usually start with relatively general information about the problem to be addressed, build toward more narrow and specific information, and end with the essay's thesis.

Here's a sample thesis statement from the thesis chapter:

Hip-hop should be considered a valid academic subject because it has proved to be an extremely influential art form, it documents and protests the conditions inner-city people live in, and it can be conceptually connected to earlier modes of African-American musical expression.

The basic organizational pattern of an argumentative introduction might look like this diagram. General information and background in the first couple of sentences builds to more specific exigence-building and thesis information later on:



Consider the following example:

[Section 1] In 2008, the Department of English at Keystone College introduced a new class that was unexpectedly controversial: it was called “Studies in Hip-Hop.” Shortly after the course was announced, however, many parents and several state legislators contacted the college and protested its inclusion on the schedule, complaining that the subject was not appropriate or serious enough to merit a college-level course. {Section 2} It is clear to many people, however, that hip-hop is a perfect subject for study at the college level: combining music, poetry, politics, history, and art, it offers serious scholars much to explore. As members of a university community, it is important that we consider issues such as these in selecting what should be studied at the university level. [Section 3] Hip-hop should be considered a valid academic subject because it has proved to be an extremely influential art form, it documents and protests the conditions inner-city people live in, and it can be conceptually connected to earlier modes of African-American musical expression.

The red section (Section 1) here offers a short narrative of the background of the problem that the essay intends to explore. A short, condensed story of the controversy over the course’s inclusion on the schedule provides the reader with information on the conflict, characters, and the issues the essay will be dealing with.

The green section (Section 2) establishes the exigence for the topic—why the reader, as a member of the university community (either a student or faculty member) should care about a problem like the one mentioned in the first couple of sentences.

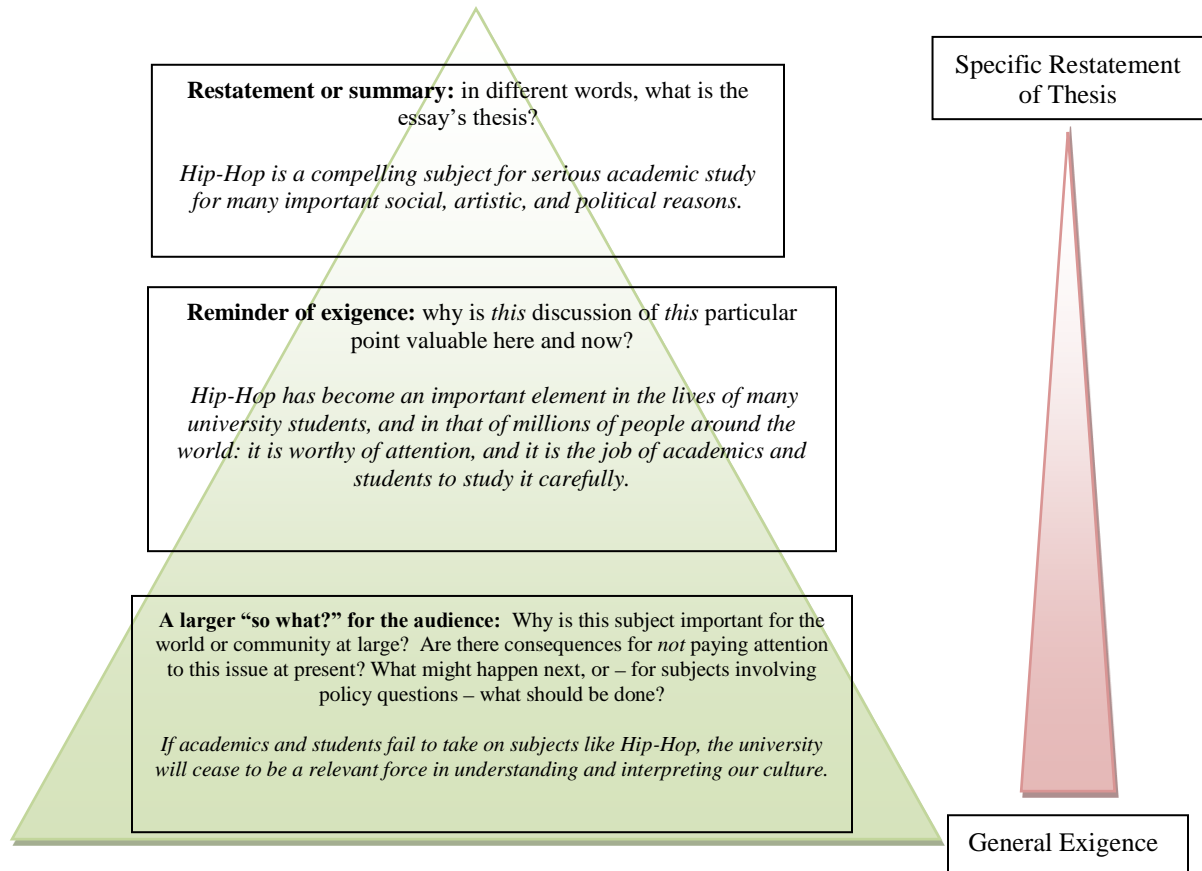
The blue section (Section 3) is the thesis statement: it is a clear and concise statement of the essay’s goal and position. The thesis occupies the position of *greatest emphasis* in the paragraph, i.e., at the end. This is what your reader will focus on when looking for your essay’s overall point.

Conclusions: Reinforcing the Idea, Reestablishing Exigence

Conclusions serve functions very similar to that of introductions: they exist to reinforce the main ideas of the essay, and remind the audience of why they in particular should care about the essay and what it has said. An essay with a strong conclusion leaves the reader with a powerful and clear impression of what the writer wants to communicate; conversely, essays with weak conclusions make the essay feel incomplete or abruptly ended, and leave the reader “hanging.” Consider, for a moment, how it would feel to hear a friend tell you a story, and then after the main action of the story, simply stop talking. How would you feel? The point of the story and the relevance to *your* life and values (as the audience) might not be clear—without your friend offering some kind of *conclusion* to the story, you might not fully understand what the story was about and why you should care.

Conclusions in general tend to be a mirror image of an essay’s introduction, restating the essay’s thesis at their outset and then proceeding to remind the audience of the overall exigence of the writing. While introductions generally move from general information to a specific thesis, conclusions for the most part proceed from a rather specific opening statement to a more general statement of exigence.

Consider the following organizational diagram for a conclusion to the Hip Hop paper we discussed above.



Below is an example of a conclusion for the Hip-Hop essay that we have been working with. The sections where the conclusion is particularly effective in achieving its primary goals are highlighted in red, green, and blue, just as in the introduction.

Hip-Hop should be considered a serious and appropriate subject for academic study for many important social, political, and artistic reasons: it chronicles the conditions of inner-city life and has directly evolved from earlier types of African-American music. Hip-Hop has become an important element in the lives of many university students, and in that of millions of people around the world: it is worthy of attention, and it is the job of academics and students, particularly in music, history, and the humanities, to study it carefully and systematically. If institutions like the university fail to examine topics like Hip-Hop and its cultural impact, they will cease to be important instruments in analyzing, understanding, and interpreting our culture: and that will be a grave loss indeed.

The red section here offers a condensed restatement of the essay's thesis statement: it covers the overall main idea of the essay and a quick summary of its primary points

The green section reminds the audience of the exigence for the topic—why the reader, as a member of the university community (either a student or faculty member) should care about a problem like the one mentioned in the first couple of sentences.

The blue section offers an even bigger “so what” for the audience, reminding them of the consequences of not paying attention to this problem or the essay's particular perspective on it.