**TLC PODCASTS: Essay writing - the introduction**

The introduction is a crucial part of any piece of academic writing. It can grab your reader’s attention and makes the first impression of your work. In the introduction, you clarify your thesis, or the main point of your essay. The reader should not have to do the work of figuring out the point the writer is trying to make – this is the writer’s job. Much of this work gets done in the introduction!

In this podcast, we’ll talk about what should be in the introduction and how to keep your reader in mind as you write your introduction.

First, I’d like to cover the basic, indispensable elements of the introduction. The way I like to remember it is: question, answer, plan.

Let's start with the **QUESTION**. The idea here is that the reader knows the specific question you will address in your essay. This doesn’t mean that you simply repeat the question that was set in the assignment (although, that’s better than no question at all!). Think back to the work you did to understand and analyse the question. (We talked about this in detail in WEDNESDAY’s podcast). Your interpretation – your “appropriation” – of the essay question is put to good use in your introduction.

The introduction is where you present to your reader your interpretation of the question. Explain to your reader the question you will be addressing in the essay, *your* specific, narrowed, interpretation of the question. In addition explaining the specific issue you plan to address, you should “define your terms”. This doesn’t mean giving a dictionary entry for a term or a long quotation. Instead, you concisely explain how you understand a particular term, and what you will mean whenever you use it throughout your essay.

You can also draw attention to any assumptions or assertions that are implicit in the question and where you stand on these. Otherwise, any ambiguous areas of the question should be made clear – the way you will approach them in the essay – here at the start.

**ANSWER** The next important task in the introduction is to give a very clear indication of what position you will be arguing. Many students think this “ruins the surprise” of the essay. An academic essay doesn’t typically rely on suspense to make an impact! Instead, the main argument is announced at the beginning - and support for that argument is built up along the way, throughout the essay. This way, your reader knows what position is being defended *beforehand.*  The “answer” is also referred to as your “thesis” or the “thesis statement”. It is a concise response to the essay question. Rather than saying “what you will talk about”, say “what you have to say”.

**PLAN** The “plan” gives your reader a very brief overview of how you are going to develop and support the answer you have proposed. You can think of it as a “road map” to your essay. Think back to MONDAY’s podcast on reading, and the idea of mapping out the main ideas in a text before reading in more depth. Indeed, in journal articles and in books, a very handy “road map” is often included toward the end of the introduction. Just as you find authors’ “road maps” helpful in your reading, your reader will also appreciate your announcing clearly the steps you will take in your essay. Be sure that the final version of your essay delivers on what you promise in the introduction. If you announce three parts, be sure there are three parts! If you add one or opt for only two; don’t forget to adjust the introduction.

Now, with those fundamental elements of the introduction explained, let’s move on to “setting the scene”.

**The context**

You might choose to begin your essay by orienting your reader, leading him from the broad subject matter to the specific issues you will address in your argument. Some students like to set the scene this way. This is fine; but it is very easy to overdo this kind of contextualising material. It is tempting to include historical background, lengthy descriptions, or an in-depth narration of the circumstances that led to a particular situation. It’s tempting because these are part of how you make sense of the subject. You’ll need to read this kind of material to help you formulate your argument, decide upon your position, and generally develop your essay. You may even need to write it for yourself. But that doesn’t mean that it should necessarily be included in your essay.

Some material on context or background can be helpful to let your reader know why the question you are addressing is an important one. It can also be part of an explanation of why you have decided to focus on particular aspects of the question. For example, you can briefly explain that you are aware of the range of issues that might be relevant to the question – but that you will focus on one or two in detail, and explain why you have selected those particular aspects.

Your introduction should not include a primer on the general topic, however. As you draft text on the context or historical background of your essay topic, ask yourself just how useful it is for making YOUR argument.

Remember that you have a word limit – which in itself is part of the challenge of essay-writing. (We’ll talk more about planning your essay and managing the word limit in tomorrow’s podcast).

By clarifying in writing these basic elements of your introduction (the question, the answer, and the plan) and why the question you are answering is an interesting or important one, you can accomplish a great deal towards making your own work on your essay more effective and more satisfying. The writing you do to clarify to yourself what your argument is and why it’s important helps you read, draft, and edit.

The final point I’d like to make about essay introductions is to remind you, though, that the final version of the introduction is principally for your reader.

**Think of your reader**

If you listened to Tuesday’s podcast, you’ll recall the idea that writing can be considered a means of thinking. Writing can be a way to reflect on various perspectives, evaluate them, and decide which ideas you find most valuable or applicable, within certain parameters or circumstances. In this way, the various drafts of your essay may reveal how your thinking developed – and possibly how you changed your mind about some ideas over the course of time.

The final version of your essay, though, should not seem to your reader like a behind-the-scenes view onto the evolution of your thinking. The version that you hand in should be a clear and convincing presentation of your argument, which is directly in response to the question that was set. The introduction is a key to communicating to your reader that you have a clear position on the question that was asked and that you will lead her, step by step, through the logical development of that position.

**Using time wisely**

Writing a good introduction requires time, both at the beginning of the essay writing process, and perhaps even more importantly at the end. As you read and write and work on your essay, you’re likely to refine your ideas, or focus in more closely on some aspects of your argument. You may even change your mind! This is a normal part of the learning process. However, if you don’t allow for sufficient time later in your essay-writing process, you will miss the opportunity to refine or rewrite your introduction. One possible effect of a poor introduction is that your reader has the impression that she is simply being presented with an incoherent series of information…that the writer has put on paper “everything he knows about topic x”.

With this in mind, I’d like to leave you with some practical advice about managing your time to ensure that your essay is introduced clearly. There’s no one right way to go about writing an introduction. On one hand, it’s at the beginning of the essay – why not write it first? This is not a straightforward as it seems, though! Sometimes people leave it to the very end.

One suggestion is to try to produce a draft introduction quite early on. This will give you a written record of your interpretation of the question and some indication of where you think you are headed with your response that question. The first draft of your introduction will also help you develop a the overall structure of your argument. But be aware that the very process of research and writing can be transformative. That is, your view on the question may shift as your work on your essay.

Remember though, that because your position may evolve or shift in the course of reading and writing, be sure to allot time AT THE END of writing the essay to review and revise the introduction. Be sure that your introduction introduces the argument that is wrapped up in the conclusion.

The main points to remember about the introduction of an essay are to be sure to include the question, the answer, and the plan. Also, define any key terms, but keep background and contextual information to a minimum. Finally, be sure you have enough time to write and read (and possibly re-write and re-read) your introduction a few times. This will help ensure that your message is clear to your reader.

As always, there are many resources and sources of support available related to writing essay introductions. Check the list of resources provided together with this podcast, and remember, you can always call in to your teachers’ or advisers’ office hours with questions about your writing. Also, support is available at the Teaching and Learning Centre from the Royal Literary Fund Fellows and the qualitative study adviser.

Tomorrow, in the last podcast for reading week, we’ll consider the overall structure of essays and talk about planning and building your essay. Thanks for listening!