

MERRIMACK COLLEGE WRITING CENTER

WRITING INTRODUCTIONS & CONCLUSIONS

Introductions and conclusions work together to establish purpose and encourage reader interest.

Purpose

The introduction has two purposes: 1) it hooks the reader, and 2) it lays out the central argument of the text. For the humanities, this may mean laying out the major steps in the argument. For the social and natural sciences, this may include a hypothesis. Usually, this means the articulation of a clear thesis.

The conclusion also has two purposes: 1) it recounts the central theme, often through a rephrased thesis or essay summary, and 2) it spurs the reader forward. In the social and natural sciences, this often involves recognizing limitations to the study or findings, and suggesting further questions for more research.

As you write, keep these purposes in mind. If you aren't meeting them, you'll need to revise!

Audience

When considering your introduction and conclusion, always remember your direct (people you are writing to) and indirect (people who may also read your work) audiences:

1. What are the cultural and disciplinary expectations for this form?
2. Will your reader already have these expectations for you to meet, or will you also be shaping their expectations?

Remember that your choices will either make or destroy your credibility as an author, so choose carefully!

Rhetorical Strategies

A rhetorical strategy is a literary or communicative device used to engage a reader and to convince her or him to follow a particular line of thinking. Try the following rhetorical strategies to hook your reader in the introduction, and close the deal in the conclusion.

Rhetorical Question: In the introduction, pose challenging questions to spur reader curiosity. In the conclusion, summarize how the body answered these questions.

Story or Anecdote: In the introduction, tell a story up to the climactic moment, then conclude with the resolution. If you use an anecdote, tell the whole tale in the introduction, but the insights learned in the body will re-shape the anecdote when you return to it in the conclusion.

Facts or Data: In the introduction, present the reader with interesting facts or data to get them thinking. In the conclusion, revisit that data in light of what you showed the reader in the body.

Quotes or References: In the introduction, open with an epigram, build a quote into the opening, or refer to a specific event in history or another discipline. In the conclusion, come back to the original quote or reference, and insight based on what you showed the reader in the body.

Problem and Solution: In the introduction, establish the problems that will be studied in the paper. The solutions may appear in the thesis, but should also appear in the conclusion.

Cause and Effect: In the introduction, present commonly accepted causes and effects for the issue you wish to discuss. In the conclusion, show how these causes and effects are either refuted or validated by the body of the essay.

Caution

Traditionally, you may have been taught to begin with a general statement, then focus down until you get to the thesis—an inverse pyramid method. While this does work for some papers even at the college level, it is better for you to evaluate the situation in light of audience, discipline, and form, than to assume that lessons you learned in high school writing are going to always be the best way or only way to write.

