

Introductions and Conclusions



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One of the most important skills you can develop in English is to write fluently. To make yourself easily understood by discussing an idea with logical support is a skill that extends beyond writing: It demonstrates your ability to communicate effectively.

A few aspects of essay writing addressed in this tutorial include how to write an introduction, a conclusion, and topic sentences. Why are these important? By effectively introducing your ideas, you engage your reader and establish your

topic. Conversely, by effectively concluding your discussion, you reinforce the ideas you've presented, and demonstrate the relevance of your point of view. A well framed topic sentence better informs your reader of your idea.

INTRODUCTIONS

"... and then Tom vomited all over his younger brother!" Sherisse laughed.

Have you ever entered in the middle of a conversation and don't know what your friends are talking about? Even in everyday conversation, we introduce topics and develop details accordingly. Introductions provide **context** for details that will follow.

Context refers to necessary back-ground information.

If you had entered the conversation earlier, Sherisse's statement would have been in context: "I had the best trip to Disneyland with my family and my cousins! One of the highlights – maybe for me, but not for my cousin Tom or his younger brother, Sam – was going on the Mad Tea Party – you know the ride where the teacups spin? Well, Tom bragged that he could handle any ride. Once the teacup started spinning, Tom's face turned various shades of green, and then Tom vomited all over his younger brother!"

Sherisse expressed her amusement at the teacup incident, reinforcing her main idea that her trip to Disneyland was "the best". Without this clearly established viewpoint, the detail that Tom vomited over his younger brother is meaningless.

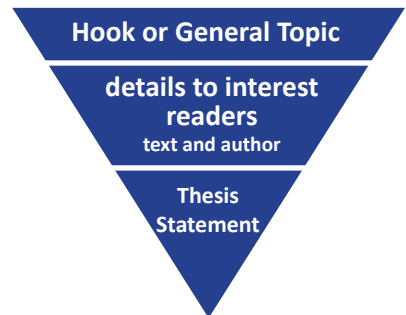
Think about how you frame conversations. Do you present a main idea, and then supporting details? It is common to introduce an idea, and then develop it further. You wouldn't start telling a story in the middle of the story without providing some context. This is the purpose of an introduction.

The Bones of the Introduction

The introduction defines and limits your topic. It presents the essence of your entire response that you will, in more detail, discuss throughout the paper. It is common to build an introduction that includes the following:

- A. **hook**, or general discussion of topic
- B. details to interest readers; introduction of text and **author**, if applicable
- C. specific statement of your point of view, or **thesis**

INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH



A. Hook

The hook is how you start your introduction. What will you say to engage your audience? Here are some suggestions:

1. Make one or two **general statements** of how your topic relates to the world or society.

If your topic is about the effects of interactions with other people (a literary exploration), a general statement such as this might work:

"Many individuals in today's society have been influenced by their encounters with others. Some of these individuals have encountered cruel, selfish people, thus developing these same traits themselves. Others have been fortunate enough to have shared their lives with someone kind, generous, and wise." (author unknown)

2. Provide a **brief anecdote**, or story, that introduces the relevance of your topic.

If your topic is about the **importance of following traffic laws** (a persuasive piece), an anecdote such as the following might work:

My friend, Sarah, learned the hard way that it's not worth it to speed. When pulled over by a policeman for going 25 km over the posted limit, she suggested that she was speeding because she had to get home to go to the bathroom. "What about the two gas stations you passed since I started following you?" came his reply. Sarah got a \$275 ticket.



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3. Correct a common misconception.

If your topic is about the effects of adversity on the human spirit, consider disagreeing with or disproving a common misconception related to the topic:

*Some people say “whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”. This **cliché** is unfounded because sometimes individuals are overwhelmed by their challenges. Overcoming adversity takes a lot of work and healing, and, for some, this takes a lifetime of effort.*

cliché: a common, overly used expression or saying

For more examples of how to create an introductory hook, see English Language Arts Handbook for Secondary Students, p. 126-127.

B. Introduce the Text, Author, and Other Important Details

If you’re writing a personal response to literature, you must identify the text and author you’ll be discussing in your introduction. This might be followed with some (textual) details that relate to the topic and develop your idea(s).

Topic question: “What is your opinion of the effects of adversity on the human spirit?”

Some people say “whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”. This cliché is unfounded because sometimes individuals are overwhelmed by their challenges. Overcoming adversity takes a lot of work and healing, and, for some, this takes a lifetime of effort. In the novel Hate List by Jennifer Brown, Valerie struggles with and, at times, is overwhelmed by, challenges related to her uncertain involvement in a school shooting. Like Valerie, my cousin struggled with bullying at his school, and the depression and anxiety he experienced as a result continue to take their toll. When faced with adversity, the human spirit struggles to overcome such challenges. When people face situations that cause depression, anxiety, and possibly guilt, they retreat into a dark place before they can start to heal.

Hook: general statement

Introduction of text, author, and literary details related to discussion

Introduction of personal experience and details related to discussion

Thesis statement

C. Thesis

No matter what type of response you’re developing, your point of view must be clear. What is your answer to the topic question? Your thesis is the idea that controls your response, and is condensed into one, complex sentence that is specific and identifies the opinion you’re going to “prove” in the remainder of your response.

Note the possible thesis in the Hate List sample above. It is specific and clear, and identifies the main idea that the writer will explore in her response. The connection to the topic question is clear, and the thesis guides the writer’s exploration of details from the novel and her personal life as she explains her opinion.

Persuasive writing also has a thesis. Consider this example:

Topic question: What is your opinion of the importance of following traffic laws?

My friend, Sarah, learned the hard way that it's not worth it to speed. When pulled over by a policeman for going 25 km over the posted limit, she suggested that she was speeding because she had to get home to go to the bathroom. "What about the two gas stations you passed since I started following you?" came his reply. "And you almost hit a pedestrian at the last intersection." Sarah got a \$275 ticket. There are consequences to disobeying traffic laws: although somewhat humorous in this instance, in many cases the consequences are more severe. Even if a person thinks she has good reason to disobey traffic laws, those laws are in place for a reason. Every person, who holds a valid driver's license, should understand and live the commitment to abide by traffic laws, not only for her own safety, but for the safety of others.

General statement

Thesis statement

This writer obviously believes that traffic laws should be obeyed for public safety. The reader understands that point of view because the supporting evidence reinforces this idea.

TOPIC SENTENCES AND TRANSITIONS

A **topic sentence** introduces the subject of your paragraph. The purpose of the topic sentence is to create unity within a paragraph, meaning all ideas in a paragraph relate to that topic. The topic sentence appears most commonly at the beginning of a paragraph, but may be at the middle or end of the paragraph. The topic sentence can also help the reader transition from one idea to the next, enhancing **fluency** in the paragraph.

fluency: how easily sentences can be read or flow together

To see how to use a topic sentence in the beginning, middle, or end of a paragraph, go to pages 104-105 in *English Language Arts Handbook for Secondary Students*.

Notice the transition, or connection of ideas, from the thesis in the introductory paragraph to the topic sentence in first body paragraph (Hate List example):

*When people face situations that cause depression and anxiety, and possibly **guilt**, they retreat into a dark place before they can start to heal.*

Thesis

*People sometimes assume responsibility for what isn't their fault, causing **guilty** feelings to interfere with their ability to forgive themselves. Because of Valerie's involvement in the creation of the hate list, she feels guilt for the shooting, even though she wasn't aware of what Nick was planning.*

Topic sentence

The topic sentence uses a key word in the thesis to direct discussion in the paragraph: then, the writer will choose details to support how guilt manifests itself in Valerie's life and impedes her ability to move forward. The writer will also include details from personal observations she mentioned in the introduction about her cousin. Each body paragraph must **maintain a strong connection to the thesis**.

In this instance, the topic sentence also provides a **transition** between the ideas of the previous paragraph's concluding sentence (thesis) and the ideas that will present themselves in the following paragraph. The words and ideas referenced (**words** = guilt/guilty, **idea** = dark place before healing/inability to forgive oneself) help to create an easy transition for the reader.

To read more about transitional devices and body paragraphs, go to pages 108-109, 128, and 127-128 respectively in *English Language Arts Handbook for Secondary Students*.

CONCLUSIONS

Have you ever had someone hang up abruptly in a telephone conversation? This kind of unexpected ending is often unsettling, particularly if you were in the middle of an engaging discussion. It leaves you wondering, "What just happened?" This is similar to your favourite musical band quitting before playing the final bars of their best song. Both instances are unsettling because there is no indication of an end.

This is the reaction of a reader if you haven't concluded your argument in an assignment. **The function of the conclusion** is to gracefully "sign off," and purposefully exit the "conversation" by recapping important ideas.

The Bones of the Conclusion

New material is **never** introduced in the conclusion. Think of this scenario: before hanging up the phone after a long conversation, you mention to your friend that you're going to elope in the morning, then cheerfully say goodbye! The effect of introducing this new information could be startling to your friend, just as it would be to introduce new details in the conclusion of a paper. So, *don't* do it: if it's an idea worth mentioning, include it in your body paragraphs.

Whereas an introduction begins with general information and moves to the specific controlling idea (thesis), the **conclusion operates in reverse**:

- A. **recap the thesis**
- B. highlight **important details** discussed in the body of the response
- C. make a general statement about **possible implications** or the relevance of your topic to **society**

CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH



Consider the sample conclusion of the **personal response to literature** for the Hate List:

It's important to try to understand and respect the perspective of people in a dark place, even if their perspective is somewhat skewed. In spite of Valerie's arguably courageous attempts to overcome her guilt, depression, and anxiety related to the shooting, she likely will struggle with these feelings for years to come. Despite her heroic intervention to stop the shooting, Valerie must live with the role she played in creation of the hate list. My cousin's fate is similar to Valerie's because his experience with bullying damaged his confidence so that he can only be around those sensitive to his bouts of depression. People can say that "whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger," but I think some would rather meet death than face their trials. The effects of some trials can haunt a person every day and last a lifetime. If people close to those who are emotionally injured show sensitivity, maybe the healing process can begin and people can emerge from despair.

Recap of thesis

Reference to some details presented in the body paragraphs

Personal reflection that includes general discussion of topic and societal relevance

Read this conclusion to the **persuasive piece** about the importance of obeying traffic laws:

I hope that by now you're convinced of the importance of obeying traffic laws, even if it sometimes seems inconvenient. It is a privilege to hold and use a valid driver's license; every time a person gets behind the wheel of a vehicle, she makes decisions that will either harm or help the people around her. It's clear from the examples I've shared that public safety should trump personal convenience. It might seem "inconvenient" to have to call a cab instead of driving home after the consumption of alcohol, but it's not nearly as "inconvenient" as having to bury a loved one. Sometimes the consequence of disobeying a law might be a ticket; other times, the consequences might be more lasting and severe. If every person made a commitment to understand the logic behind traffic laws and used the power of reason to foresee the series of consequences that can result from one's poor decisions, the roads would be much safer, and fewer "accidents", injuries, and deaths would occur.

Recap of thesis

Reference to significant details mentioned in the body paragraphs

Statement about implications and societal relevance of topic

For more information about concluding paragraphs, read pages 128-129 in *English Language Arts Handbook for Secondary Students*.

AND IN CONCLUSION . . .

Follow the "formula" presented for introductions and conclusions in your next personal or persuasive response, ensure your topic sentences connect with the main idea, or thesis, and you'll likely find that your "conversation" flows better!