

Great Introductions

An introduction does not need to be long (and should not be), but it is an important part of an essay. A weak introduction can cause readers to lose interest in your essay from the start, whereas a strong introduction will engage your readers and make them want to continue reading. Of course, the introduction is the first part of your essay that your audience will read, and it's important to make a good first impression.

Sometimes when we write an essay we forget that we're speaking to someone (a reader). We also forget that the beginning of our essay is technically the first impression that we make on the reader, while the conclusion is our last chance to get the reader's attention. Rather than focusing on writing an essay that is simply "correct" (in terms of grammar, following your assignment requirements, etc.) good writers also consider whether or not they've left a lasting impression on their reader.

Think about it: the movies you've seen and the books you've read, the ones that really stand out in your mind, probably had an intriguing opening and a compelling ending. Your essay topic may not be as exciting as your favorite movie, but that doesn't mean you can't make sure that your ideas stand out in the reader's mind.

Approaches to Writing Introductions:

Each of the introductions below presents the same thesis statement: "Identify theft is a serious problem that claims millions of innocent victims, and the government must implement better regulations to help put an end to this crime." While the thesis statement is the same for all of the introductions, notice how the various introductions set different tones for the essay and establish slightly different expectations for what will follow in the body of the essay.

1. Begin with background or historical information

Identity theft is not a new crime. Throughout history, unscrupulous individuals have pretended to be people they are not, often with the goal of political, social, or financial gain. With the right appearance and demeanor, people have falsely presented themselves as kings and bishops. Today, in our information age, identity theft is a far more prevalent problem. With access to names, Social Security numbers, and other personal information, thieves are able to steal identities, leaving the victims struggling to clear their good names. Identify theft is a serious problem that claims millions of innocent victims, and the government must implement better regulations to help put an end to this crime.

2. Begin with a Quotation

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Iago claims that he "who steals my purse steals trash / . . . But he that filches from me my good name / Robs me of that which not enriches him, / And makes me poor indeed" (3.3.157-161). Today, identity theft is a new way that thieves steal both the "purses" and the good names of innocent victims, and these thieves are enriching themselves at the expense of their victims. Identify theft is a serious problem that claims millions of innocent victims, and the government must implement better regulations to help put an end to this crime.

3. Begin with an Interesting or Surprising Fact

Identity fraud is the fastest growing crime in the United States. In 2004, over nine million Americans, or approximately one person in 24, became victims of identity fraud or identity theft, at a cost to the economy of 52.6 billion dollars (“2005 Identity Fraud Survey Report”). Because many cases of identity fraud and identity theft may go unreported, the numbers could be even higher. Identity theft is a serious problem that claims millions of innocent victims, and the government must implement better regulations to help put an end to this crime.

4. Begin with a Definition of an Important Term:

Our identity is what makes us unique. It is “the distinguishing character or personality of an individual,” and when one is a victim of identity theft, it is this “distinguishing character” that is stolen: one's name, address, Social Security number, employment history, credit history, and more. It therefore is no wonder that victims of identity theft often feel a deep sense of violation as they struggle to reclaim their good names. Identity theft is a serious problem that claims millions of innocent victims, and the government must implement better regulations to help put an end to this crime.

5. Begin with a short narrative

Joe Stevens was finally ready to purchase a home. He spent years putting money into a savings account, paid off his credit cards, and diligently paid every bill on time. Confident of his good credit rating, Joe visited the bank to inquire about a mortgage, but he discovered startling information: Joe defaulted on a home loan, had \$40,000 in credit card debt, and had a car repossessed for lack of payment. Joe Stevens, like many Americans, is a victim of identity theft. Instead of preparing to move into a new home, Joe began the long journey to restore his good name and to reclaim his identity. Identity theft is a serious problem that claims millions of innocent victims, and the government must implement better regulations to help put an end to this crime.

6. Begin with a Question

How would you feel if you knew, at this moment, that some criminal is writing your name, address, and Social Security number on credit card applications and plans to charge thousands of dollars worth of merchandise on those credit cards? More importantly, how do you know that this is not happening? Millions of people have become victims of identity theft, and they often find out only after thousands of dollars have been stolen using their names. Identity theft is a serious problem that claims millions of innocent victims, and the government must implement better regulations to help put an end to this crime.

Introductions to Avoid:

Some approaches to introductions almost always fail to be interesting or engaging. Below are a few approaches to introduction that should be avoided. They are just about guaranteed to give an essay a weak beginning.

1. Avoid Beginning with Overly Vague and General Statements or Broad Generalizations

Example: Crimes are committed every day by different people, and there are many different kinds of crime. Some crimes are more serious than others. One serious crime today is identity theft. *(Can you hear the readers already starting to snooze? The first two sentences to this introduction are far too vague and general to get anyone interested in what the writer is going to say in the paper.)*

2. Avoid Beginning with Dictionary Definitions Obvious to Readers

Example: According to Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, the word “steal” is defined as “to take the property of another wrongfully.” Identity theft is one form of stealing. *(The writer of these sentences seems to assume that the readers are stupid, which is not a good impression to give readers. Who would not already know this definition of “steal”?)*

3. Avoiding Beginning with a Direct Statement of What You, as the Writer, are Doing

Example: In this essay, identity theft will be explained. I will discuss why it is such a big problem and what the government should do about it. *(Such an introduction might be appropriate for a writer in junior high school, but mature writers use much more effective rhetorical strategies to begin their essays.)*