

The Epic Voiceover

Wherein the introduction begins too broadly

Since the dawn of civilisation, humans have disagreed over many things. Wars have been fought over religious differences; people have developed complex weaponry with which to kill each other over fine distinctions between cultures which, from the outside, seem broadly similar. Throughout the bloodbath of history, conflict has been more prevalent than peace. The debate between smooth and crunchy peanut butter is no different...

In writing classes, students are often told to begin their introduction by providing context for their argument, acknowledging the larger scope of their topic before narrowing down to a thesis. This is good advice in general, as long as the “larger scope of the topic” is not all of human history. Try to reign in your introduction to a brief summary of the things the reader needs to know in order to understand your paper and why it matters. For the paper on smooth vs crunchy peanut butter, this information would likely include some brief history (when did people start making and eating peanut butter?), a few scientific facts (how is peanut butter made?), and some cultural background (where and by whom is it enjoyed?). The reader does not need to hear about how humans need food to survive, or about different people value different tastes. Unless your reader is from another planet, she probably already knows this. Note: if the introduction is too broad, that is often a good indicator that the thesis is also too broad, leading to...

A Brief History of Time

Wherein the thesis is too broad

In the skies, we see the sun in daylight and the moon in the darkness. The Earth brings us morning and evening as it revolves around its axis, summer and winter as it orbits around our giant star. Humans have experienced the warmest of days and the coldest of nights, watched the rise and set of the sun that gives us our bright mornings and midnight stars. But none of it would've been known unless we go back to where it all began ages ago.

When writing an essay, we are expected to write a thesis that generally summarizes the main idea of the piece. You want to catch the reader's attention with your opening sentence, but you will need to maintain their interest as they read on. With a thesis too broad, the readers won't know what to expect in your essay. "A Brief History of Time" may be about the history of the universe, however, readers might expect an essay on the history of how humans interpret time, and all they will get in the end is literally five minutes of wasted time (what is the "it" that wouldn't have been known?). On the other hand, writing an exact outline of the essay is equally as hopeless in getting your reader interested in your topic. What's the point in reading your piece if you've already said everything in the introduction? No one would be bothered to read the rest of the essay. A thesis should be clear and fairly easy to identify in the introductory paragraph. You want to engage the reader to your topic and keep them reading until the end.

The Aimless Wanderer

Wherein there is no thesis

Our four-legged, wet-nosed, mailman-barking furry friends give us unlimited cuddles and love us unconditionally without asking for anything in return. The mother-child relationship is also a depiction of a pure form of love. A mother cares for her children day and night without asking for anything in return- it is one of the most beautiful connections. Sometimes, the importance of these pure love, selfless relationships can be taken for granted until they are no longer present in one's life.

Writers can wander and end up only mentioning brief ideas without concision nor explanation of their connection to the rest of the paper in their introduction. The thesis statement is like the glue of the paragraph and brings together all the ideas presented. A thesis statement also serves as an outline to what the rest of the paper is going to be about and introduces your argument. With the excerpt above, the reader will know about dogs, moms, and love, but why are these ideas important? How are they connected to the rest of the paper? For this paper, the thesis statement could explain why these relationships are so important and focus on one or two reasons which the rest of the paper can focus on. Without a thesis statement, for all we know the rest of the paper could be about types of animals. To ensure you're including a thesis statement, once you have written the introduction, reread it and make sure there is one sentence that directly highlights what the paper will discuss.

The Meaning of Life

Wherein the paper is too ambitious

Everyone loves a cold and creamy ice cream cone on a hot summer day. This cold treat is perfect to cool yourself while also satisfying your sweet tooth. However, no one ever stops to consider the side effects of consuming such a tempting reward. While this will be described in more detail soon, studies show that ice cream consumption leads to murder. Now while one may say that this is no more than just a coincidence and the scientific phenomenon of correlation, there are many other factors that would suggest a stronger relationship between these two stats.

The passage above shows how sometimes a writer may try to accomplish too difficult of a task in their paper. Oftentimes, this looks like trying to prove something that is really a stretch like the example above, but also trying to prove something with no credible evidence to back up their argument. Even though the amount of ice cream consumed and the murder rate seem to be related, there is no real evidence to support this connection and it would be a bit ridiculous if anyone actually believed this. The author of this passage is trying to make connections that don't really make sense. Sometimes we have ideas that seem good in our heads, but when we write them down, they just fall apart and you realize that you really don't have an argument after all. To avoid this, brainstorming is always encouraged before writing. By making sure your evidence is strong and makes sense, it ensures your argument isn't too much of a stretch.

“I’m Probably Wrong But...”

Wherein the writer undermines their own authority

Albert Arnold Gore Jr. is the former vice president of the United States, making him a historical figure. He spent the summers outside of Nashville, Tennessee. Or ... maybe not. Was it Asheville not Nashville? Well, whatever, it can’t be that important. Anyway, after graduating from St. Albans School, he packed his belongings and headed up north. His motives were not totally clear and I may be wrong, but I believe he left the rain and haze behind in hopes of inhabiting a snowier city. Although, I actually think it snows a few times a year in Nashville (or Asheville). I’m not a meteorologist though, so I wouldn’t know, but you get the point ... he wanted the cold weather. After making his way up to New England, he began his freshman year at Harvard ... or was it Tufts? Not sure, but they’re basically the same thing ... right?

Sometimes we come across writing that was produced by authors who refuse to assert their own authority. This manifests itself as questioning facts or opinions which then taints the writing with a tone of uncertainty. It’s always important to ensure facts are cited and double (or triple) checked before publication, but once that is done, authors should be confident in their writing. The same is even true for fiction where there is no fact-checking. Additionally, indecision and self-undermining may confuse the reader. When the reader is confused, the body of writing is less interesting to read and overall less memorable. Confused readers may miss the central message of the body of writing and instead focus on how the author was too wishy-washy and couldn’t confidently portray a point.

The View from Above

Wherein the writer's privilege is showing

Throughout this paper, the topic of inclusivity in the workplace was analyzed in reference to gender. When addressing the divide in sports, it was noted that women often do not join nighttime company sports teams, which consequently contributes to their lack of inclusion in their workplace. Another factor that tended to cause a gender divide in the workplace was that non-male workers seemed to refuse to celebrate Christmas traditionally...

A good step for a writer to take before beginning to write, or generally in life, is to acknowledge the privileges they possess from having their life. When writing about a topic that pertains to identities that you do not share, you need to take the time to research what a person of that identity experiences. In this text, if you are writing about the lack of inclusivity of non-male workers, you have to consider why their identity may impact their actions. By not recognizing that women tend to fear going out alone at night due to safety concerns, you erase how gender affects their experiences. Another tip you should remember is similar to how we reread for grammar mistakes; we have to analyze our writing for biases. Often writers tend to overlook how their perspective may be affecting their writing so, reexamining your work may allow you to recognize why not everyone may not celebrate a religious holiday like Christmas. However, if you ever doubt your work's inclusivity, takes the time to show your draft to someone of a different background than you.

The Rocket Ship Manual

Wherein the writer uses too much jargon

Every photographer has dreamed of waking up at 5am to capture their bucket shot photo. This blissful moment of perfection doesn't come without preparation. The photographer makes sure every 35mm complementary metal oxide semiconductor, sometimes referred to as CMOS, full frame camera sensor is cleaned to a standard rivaling that of an eye doctor's instruments. Their bag is already packed with a variety of lenses ranging from your standard f/2.4 50mm to their most expensive f/1.8 135mm series full frame adaptable aperture for the highest quality pixel resolution recorded on such a small camera body.

In writing class, students often do thorough research on topics they are writing about for papers. While becoming extremely knowledgeable on a topic is beneficial to the quality of writing, using technical jargon specific to the topic creates a barrier between you and the reader. You may understand the writing because you have researched the topic, but it is important to ask yourself: would my roommate after a few drinks understand this without any context? Either find ways to present similar ideas without the technical jargon to make the writing more clear, or explain the jargon so that the reader does not feel lost or uninterested due to a sheer lack of understanding. If you first heard about something on your third source for your paper, the reader probably does not know what you are talking about. Note: just because you have done photography for ten years does not mean that your reader has ever used a camera besides the one on their phone.

The Chocolate Commercial

Wherein the writer uses too many adverbs and adjectives

For most of humankind's lengthy history, we have been tremendously, extremely, excessively fascinated by the mysterious sea. The deep, dark, murky ocean captivates us, and provokes intense, imaginative thoughts of what enormous and terrifying creatures could lurk menacingly in its murky, shadowy, ominous depths. Though we've certainly without a doubt been using boats for millennia, it is only with the advent of modern, advanced, cutting-edge, innovative technology that we can at last finally investigate what in fact truly lies beneath the intriguing, dynamic, mystifying, fluctuating, at times relaxed, serene, and picturesque, and at other times mighty, violent, ferocious, and destructive waves. And yet, surprisingly, an astonishing and unexpected eighty percent of the world's massive oceans still remain wholly, totally, absolutely, thoroughly unexplored.

It's happened to all of us. You finish writing your essay and find that it's not quite long as it's supposed to be. But rather than come up with a whole new sentence, you decide to just throw in some extra adjectives and adverbs in an attempt to increase your word count. And where's the harm in that? Being extra descriptive can't hurt, right? The truth is, excessive descriptions can undermine the effectiveness of your essay. If your reader has to trudge their way through unnecessary descriptive words in every sentence of your writing, they may have a harder time deciphering your point. The last thing you want is for readers to get confused and need to reread sections of your work. Longer does not equal better. If that extra adverb or adjective doesn't change the meaning of your sentence, just leave it out.

The Tasting Menu

Wherein the writer provides a lot of irrelevant information

Much to James' dismay, the mysterious buzz emanating from the second floor became more and more quiet as he crept upstairs. The stairs, creaky they were, were built in 1973 by his father, who was a carpenter by hobby and also named James. His mother, Jane, was at first not too keen at the prospect of James (the father) building and installing the stairs himself but warmed up to it after two months of discussion. Speaking of warm, it was a warm night in August, warmer than the night before but not as warm as it was two nights ago. For dinner James ate leftover baked ziti that his mother prepared, forgetting that the dish often causes him digestive issues. As he stepped on the landing, the buzz instantly shot up to an ear splitting volume...

To keep the reader engaged, it is best to keep details to a meaningful amount. If there are sentences or words that do not contribute meaningfully to the story or message of your writing, remove them and rewrite. Concision is always preferable to lengthy, unnecessary writing. However, writing does not have to be concise to be meaningful. There are plenty of other details to include in the paragraph above that would develop the story, but long-winded descriptions about the stairs, weather, and our protagonist's eating habits do not really add to the suspense of the story. Writing should flow; the reader should not need to rake through your language to understand the plot or message.

The Impersonal Anecdote

Wherein the writer over-uses the passive voice

The causes of behavior are debated by many psychologists. That the environment alone decides behavior is believed by some, and that genetics and biology are the main determinants are believed by others. However, a conclusion that it is a mixture of both nature and nurture that influence behavior is agreed upon by most. How biology and the environment interact to determine behavior is questioned by many psychologists and scientists alike. The biological aspect is concentrated on by neuroscientists, while the environmental aspects are concentrated on by behavioralists.

Beginning writers sometimes overuse the passive voice: “The car was driven by Kaylie” vs “Kaylie drove the car”. However, most people have trouble understanding what the passive voice is, let alone how to avoid it. The passive voice is when the object of a sentence becomes the noun of a sentence. In the example above “Kaylie” is the subject and “the car” is the object acted upon. In the passive voice, “the car” would take the place of the subject of the sentence. It is important to note that the passive voice is NOT the overuse of the verb “be” as many believe it to be. The problem with the passive voice is that it makes the actions seem unclear, causing the writing to be “slower” than if written in the active voice. Sometimes, it is acceptable to use the passive voice, as in cases where who or what (usually the subject) has acted upon the object is unknown. Take the example “Someone built the house in 1900” vs “The house was built in 1900”. The second example is written in the passive voice and in this case, is more direct than the first example. The passive voice does not necessarily need to be omitted in all writing, beginning writers just need to learn when it is appropriate and advantageous to use it.

The Marathon

Wherein the sentences go on and on and...

There are two major types of peanut butter on the market, one where peanuts are evenly grinded to a smooth texture called creamy peanut butter, and the other where coarsely grinded peanuts are added to the evenly grinded peanut butter paste to create what is called crunchy peanut butter, in addition to peanuts the recipe to peanut butter also include sugar, salt, vegetable oil, etc, and both can be used in a variety of recipes.

As writers, we are told to condense our writings as much as possible because compact sentences are seen as more effective. However, when more than one idea is being squeezed into a sentence without proper punctuation or conjunctions, we end up with a sentence that goes on and on and on also known as a run-on sentence. Run-on sentences are confusing to readers because it tries to present an overwhelming amount of ideas which as a result, blurs out the significance of the argument. To avoid this mistake, separate your ideas into different clauses, and connect related clauses with appropriate conjunctions. In addition, adding filler words can also lengthen an otherwise perfect sentence. When editing your writing, look for unnecessary or repeated adjectives and reevaluate their purpose in the sentence. The sentence above can be divided into the following clauses: The two types of peanut butter, the attributes of each type, the ingredients of peanut butter, and their uses. After identifying the clauses, remove excess words such as the unnecessary use of “major” in the first clause and the repetitive use of “peanut butter” throughout the sentence.

Therefore: Potatoes!

Wherein the writer leaps from evidence to conclusion with nothing in between

The Irish Potato Famine of 1845 crippled the population of Ireland, resulting in the death of nearly a million Irishmen. The infestation began when a “fungus-like organism called phytophthora infestans” ruined a large portion of the potato crop. Thus, the Irish were thwarted from achieving complete world dominance.

Writing a paper, one might often become so immersed in their own thoughts that they fail to think about how their essay actually reads when, you know, someone reads it. Quite often the meaning of a quote or paraphrase is so clear (to the writer, and only the writer) that the analysis meant to guide the reader along the same thinking process is entirely missing, without even a hint that it was there in the first place. This is slightly problematic-- because in an essay that could have progressed clearly from the loss of crops due to an infestation, to the starvation of heavily reliant tenant farmers, to the consequent mass death and refugee crisis, the reader is often left staring at “Irish world dominance” in utter confusion. One of the most effective ways to pull meaning from a quote is to pick one or two words that hold the most power, the most meaning, and then elaborate on them in the following analysis. Or, alternatively, pick evidence that is as focused as it can possibly be-- just a sentence or part of a sentence if at all possible. Tell the reader why this evidence has been placed before them. Connect one dot to another through each consecutive piece of evidence, and then finally reach a conclusion only when there is enough explanation and analysis to gently guide the reader to it, like a tube on a lazy-river (and not Niagara Falls).