

Writing Effective Introductions in 5 Simple Steps  
ENGL 1101/2  
Prof. Bishop

When writing introductions, writers must remember a few essential elements necessary for making the introduction clear and effective.

1. Every introduction should announce, clearly and carefully, the text, author, and date of publication, which are all essential elements of contextualization. Without these three things, your essay will be ineffective because we will not understand the proper context or frame in which we are reading this argument or analysis.

- Ineffective opening: Mrs. Mallard is the main character of Kate Chopin's story.

**Comment [JB1]:** While this is factually accurate, this sentence doesn't "do" anything.

- Effective opening: In Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" (1894), the protagonist, Mrs. Mallard, is told about her husband's death, thus propelling her a journey to discover who she will be now that she thinks he is dead.

**Comment [JB2]:** This is essential information. Think about how this story would be different if it were written in, say, 1994. Would we really be concerned that a woman's husband has died? Surely you know someone who has been widowed or divorced. In our society, this is not really a cause for alarm. Sure, it's sad, but it is a commonplace in our culture.

2. One should always tell us the important information about the text, such as the protagonist and major plot points (or at least the one/ones you'll be focusing upon). Set the stage. Ease us into the argument you are going to make. Do not include unnecessary information, but do not leave out important details.

- Ineffective: Mrs. Mallard's husband dies, and her sister Josephine tells her after Richards tells Josephine that there was a real bad train wreck. Richards is Brently Mallard's best friend.

**Comment [JB3]:** This is a major plot point in the text, yet it is glossed over in a choppy independent clause.

**Comment [JB4]:** Unless this is pertinent to your argument, leave it out. Josephine and Richards don't really matter here. This actually confuses the reader into trying to guess who the protagonist of your essay will be.

- Effective: In Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" (1894), the protagonist, Mrs. Mallard, is told about her husband's death, thus propelling her a journey to discover who she will be now that she thinks he is dead.

**Comment [JB5]:** This is essential to know, so that the reader knows exactly who we'll be discussing in the essay.

**Comment [JB6]:** Notice the passive voice here. Normally, I caution against using passive voice, but we're trying to set up a cause-effect relationship (wait for it) and this is a good use of the PV.

**Comment [JB7]:** Major plot point

**Comment [JB8]:** Significance of the plot point.

3. Here, you should introduce the “hinge,” the thing that is going to move from summary to analysis. Think of the hinge like this: without a hinge, your cabinet doors wouldn’t be attached to the cabinets. The hinge allows for a kind of flexible, functional connection.

- Ineffective: Mrs. Mallard doesn’t act like a good wife being that she runs away and then gets all happy about Brently being dead and all.
- Effective: In Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” (1894), the protagonist, Mrs. Mallard, is told about her husband’s death, thus propelling her a journey to discover who she will be now that she thinks he is dead. Her reaction to this news is out of keeping with what would likely have happened, considering the period.

4. Once your hinge is in place, open the door for a complication. Using the cabinet analogy, think about how opening the door will reveal something that is in the cabinet (the text as a microcosm for society).

- Ineffective: Chopin’s story is about Mrs. Mallard’s secret desires.
- Effective: This seems to cause readers to wonder what Chopin’s “veiled hints” really mean.

5. Now that you have complicated the text, move us toward your thesis. In some cases, you can jump right in and throw it down. In other cases, you cannot. You must make sure that the sentences move logically from one to the next. Focus on smoothing out the words here. Your thesis is the most important part of the essay, so you’ll want to set it up quite nicely.

- Ineffective: Mrs. Mallard experiences sexual liberation during her time in her room.
- Effective: Through the use of “veiled hints,” Chopin dramatizes Mrs. Mallard’s newfound freedom by making it a sexual freedom, which conflicts with what we know about late-nineteenth century social codes. However, readers know that Brently is not dead, thus undercutting the freedom, sexual or otherwise, that Mrs. Mallard experiences. Chopin illustrates how once women were given a taste of freedom, they could not go back to the oppressive ways of patriarchy.

**Comment [JB9]:** Aside from the grammatical and mechanic issues here—don’t laugh, either, this is a student example—the main issue at hand is the phrase “good wife,” which implies that the writer will be espousing what a “good wife” does or doesn’t do. Your job as literary critic is not to judge the text or characters, but to interpret what they do. “She is not a good wife” is an opinion because there is not enough evidence in the text for you to support and qualify this kind of claim.

**Comment [JB10]:** Now, think about how we’re saying, essentially, that she does do what our culture expects a good wife to do, but we’re saying it in a way that is open ended and not judgmental. We can infer, based on statements in the story, that she does not act in accordance with the social norm.

**Comment [JB11]:** This particular sentence, while reasonably accurate, is structurally weak. It rushes to say something that is complex and doesn’t allow for any other reading of the text. This illustrates the dangers of using the “is” verb too heavily. This sentence implies that this idea, secret desire, represents the only meaning in the story. It is far too reductive.

**Comment [JB12]:** Notice how this particular sentence allows for different interpretations of the text. The “seems to cause” is the most important aspect because it says to the reader, “Even if you didn’t see it this way, we can still read this. Let me show you.”

**Comment [JB13]:** Okay, so what? Who cares? Your thesis should be about addressing these very issues. Your argument should be complex and it should be focused. More importantly, it should be integrated into the introduction.

The Completed Paragraphs:

Ineffective:

Mrs. Mallard is the main character of Kate Chopin's story. Mrs. Mallard's husband dies, and her sister Josephine tells her after Richards tells Josephine that there was a real bad train wreck. Richards is Brently Mallard's best friend. Mrs. Mallard doesn't act like a good wife being that she runs away and then gets all happy about Brently being dead and all. Chopin's story is about Mrs. Mallard's secret desires. Mrs. Mallard experiences sexual liberation during her time in her room.

Effective:

In Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" (1894), the protagonist, Mrs. Mallard, is told about her husband's death, thus propelling her a journey to discover who she will be now that she thinks he is dead. Her reaction to this news is out of keeping with what would likely have happened, considering the period. This seems to cause readers to wonder what Chopin's "veiled hints" really mean. Through the use of "veiled hints," Chopin dramatizes Mrs. Mallard's newfound freedom by making it a sexual freedom, which conflicts with what we know about late-nineteenth century social codes. However, readers know that Brently is not dead, thus undercutting the freedom, sexual or otherwise, that Mrs. Mallard experiences. Chopin illustrates how women, once given a taste of freedom, could not go back to the oppressive ways of patriarchy.