

*furthermore* or *in fact*, is one way to increase coherence; a second method is repeating key words from the end of the previous paragraph, as this writer does with *Hollywood* and *technology*. Always make sure that your reader can follow a logical transition from one paragraph to the next.

## INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPHS

Many of us—like Alvy Singer, who in *Annie Hall* (1977) refuses to enter a movie even a few minutes late—know how important a beginning is. Although many Hollywood films settle quickly into mediocre stories and styles, the first ten minutes can provide the most captivating and innovative sequence of the entire experience (which is a way of keeping you in your seat). Beginnings are crucial to any presentation, and no matter how long your essay will be, getting that first paragraph right could be the most important revision of your essay.

An essay must hold a reader's interest if it is to communicate information or make a point, and the introductory paragraph is where that interest should first be piqued. Starting your paper with a string of commonplaces—that Frank Capra was an American director, that his films were very popular, and so on—is not likely to encourage your reader to continue reading. Even when a reader (say, your instructor) is obliged to finish reading an essay with a dull beginning, that first paragraph creates an expectation about your work. The first paragraph is the ideal place to give your reader a clear sense of what your topic is and how you intend to develop it: the *thesis statement* that tells exactly and specifically what is the argument of the essay. Even in long and ambitious essays, that direction is clearly announced as a signpost and provocation for the reader:

In the late 1930s, public discussion about Hollywood changed. Clergymen in backwater towns could still raise a crowd by railing against sin on the silver screen, and judges and reformers here and there continued to maintain that movies led impressionable youth to crime. Among academics and in literary circles, however, and in the principal newspapers and magazines, the moviemakers were regarded with considerably more respect, awe and even envy, as the possessors of the power to create the nation's myths and dreams. (Sklar 195)

The essay's title, "The Making of Cultural Myths: Walt Disney and Frank Capra," catches the attention of many readers who recognize both names

but would not necessarily place them on common ground. As with all good openings, however, the introductory paragraph does not simply restate that title (“This essay will discuss cultural myth in the movies of Walt Disney and Frank Capra”). Instead, it introduces its topic in terms that are more general and, at the same time, more concrete. Starting with a specific historical reference (the late thirties), the paragraph describes a specific historical transition in the debate between those who thought the movies were frivolous and those who believed they were an important cultural medium. With that debate as a background, the paragraph moves to its thesis about the power of the movies of Disney and Capra to create social myths.

**NOTE:** Whether you formulate a title before you begin writing this first paragraph or after you have finished a final draft, always make the title an informative and enticing entry into your first paragraph: It should be broad enough to suggest the scope of your topic but specific enough to get your reader interested. “Cultural Myths” would have been far too general a title for the above example; “Walt Disney and Frank Capra” would have been too quirky and unclear.

An opening paragraph should identify the object of study (here, moviemakers of the late thirties) and the topic the writer is focusing on (here, history and cultural myths). Often, the focus is the analysis of a particular film or part of a film. You can organize a first paragraph by moving from a general proposition to a specific statement of your argument. Or, as the last example shows, you can move from specific examples to a more general (but not too general!) thesis that your paper will develop.

Introducing a provocative quotation or a specific image is one way to energize a first paragraph. Whatever method you use, your aim is to convince your reader immediately that you have something worthwhile to say, an argument that needs airing, observations that are not readily apparent. Although the rest of your paper will develop and expand on these first propositions, you should make very clear here what your essay is about and what method you will use to investigate your topic. If you compose and focus this paragraph to fit the length and limits of your paper, that paper will be much easier to write: Nothing is more common and more disastrous than the massive thesis statement (“This is a study of *Traffic* [2000].”) formulated when a writer doubts he or she can find enough to say about a more narrowly focused topic.

In many ways, the first paragraph is the most difficult of the essay; it presumes you know pretty much where the argument is going, although some conclusions are often arrived at in the writing itself. Although it is

important to formulate an introductory paragraph in the first draft, you should plan to reexamine and rewrite that paragraph in a later draft. At that point, an effective first paragraph will become much easier to write.

## CONCLUDING PARAGRAPHS

For some students, a popular strategy for reaching a conclusion is to rephrase the opening thesis in slightly different words (“Thus, I have shown . . .”). This approach, however, frequently seems mechanical and dull. A concluding paragraph, like an opening paragraph, is best when it makes your reader attend to it, and to sit up and realize that something interesting has been said that may have implications beyond the bounds of the essay. Some summary is not necessarily a bad idea, especially when an argument has been a bit complicated or involved; even so, earlier ideas should be retrieved not merely to remind the reader of what has been said but to emphasize a final point, as Dudley Andrew does in this conclusion:

Thus, despite its apparently hermetic form, *Diary of a Country Priest* situates itself in a cosmic openness. It is a film written across the pages of a notebook, yet it is set in a field of light and sound. The concentration and discipline of the diary allow the curé to attain in his final hours a breadth of soul explicitly measured against his pathetically liberal defrocked friend. His rigorous instrument of self-knowledge—his writing—has brought him into focus with his image and, therefore, has made him one with Christ. It is through a similar textual discipline, this time of cinematic style, that Bresson can in the end reach beyond cinema and be at one with *his* subject, a novel. By going beyond cinema through cinema, he has achieved a revolution in the ethics and potential of adaptation; he has *performed* a novel in sight and sound, not capturing his subject so much as becoming it. (130)

Conclusions often attempt to wrap up a complex argument too neatly, yet sweeping generalizations are risky. Some of the most effective conclusions close an argument within the range of that particular essay, at the same time opening it to other questions.

In concluding a discussion of Leni Riefenstahl’s films and photographic work, Richard Meran Barsam moves carefully from the specific to the general, referring to historical figures and titles, arriving at some definite conclusions about the woman and her work yet maintaining

a relatively balanced and open-minded tone that points the reader toward other questions:

The Nuba film will be similar to her other work because it will express again the special world that has engaged her imagination since she was a child. Leni Riefenstahl's world is a world apart, a world of crystal grottoes, of men who think they are supermen, of the human body made godlike through film, of elite warriors on a dark and foreign plain. This world exists in fact, but it becomes in her imagination a very different entity. Protected by her belief in that entity, which is, of course, her art, Leni Riefenstahl remains apart from much of the everyday world. She cannot understand why many people in that world will not accept her or her legends; as she publishes her Nuba photographs (to some, a bold and striking act of penance), she thinks that these documents will show her belief in man's honesty, goodness, and oneness with nature. The Nuba photographs do show those aspects, of course, but they are photographs of a disappearing world. Fortunately for all mankind, her photographs of Hitler represent another world that has disappeared, but the world will not forget that she found it necessary, and perhaps even advantageous, to make those pictures and to create the myths that infuse *Triumph of the Will* with its terrifying power. A truly enigmatic woman, Leni Riefenstahl fights against the legend that she has created for herself, fights against it even as it encloses the final years of her life. Leni Riefenstahl is one with her legend, inseparable from the world that she has made. She has what every artist since Daedalus has dreamed of, except the power to fall, to admit error, and to transcend the fragile barrier that stands between art and life. (37)

For some, the final rhetorical flourish here might seem a bit much. Conclusions and openings are always more rhetorical than other paragraphs, however, and whether or not they choose a more matter-of-fact tone, writers should strive to get as much out of their words as possible—especially at the crucial points in an essay.

## CHECKLIST FOR WRITING AN EFFECTIVE ESSAY

Each writer has personal methods and strategies. The following are some summary guidelines, suggestions, and reminders:

1. Be prepared for a movie. Before you see a film, ask preliminary questions about when and where it was made and about your own

expectations concerning it. Ask which of your other interests—technology, art, business—might point you in a good direction when writing about film.

2. Learn to look carefully at the movie and to take notes. Let your general, preliminary questions become more specific and concrete as you respond to the movie. What seems most important in it? What seems most unusual about it?

3. Let your questions lead you to a manageable topic that involves both the themes of the film and its technical and formal features. A topic like “The Search for Identity in *Citizen Kane*” is probably too large for a short essay; a much more compelling topic would be “Kane's Childhood: The Beginning of an Identity Crisis.” The more concentrated focus of the second topic will allow you to examine scenes and sequences in detail.

4. Try to view the movie at least one more time after you have decided on a topic. Expand your notes at this point, filling in details you may have missed during your first screening.

5. Keep clarifying your argument; transfer your notes to a computer file (or note cards or a notebook if you prefer). Begin your argument with a statement of the problem or question you intend to address. Then, assemble and lay out the specific points of your discussion, using concrete evidence from the movie and your interpretation of it. Good essays usually proceed from less debatable thematic points to more complex points about style and technique. Remember, you are presuming that the reader has seen the movie but will need to be convinced of the point you wish to make.

6. Many writers find it useful to sketch out the organization of an essay in outline form. Depending on your habits and preferences, your outline may be very complete and detailed or rather general and sketchy. If you tend to have trouble with organization and paragraphing, you will want to make it as complete as possible. For each section of the outline, you may even wish to write full sentences as headings; these may later become your topic sentences.

7. Begin to write. For many professionals as well as students, this is the most difficult part and we all have too many ways to put it off (taking more notes, watching the movie again, checking your e-mail, etc.). Delays do not make the task any easier. Creating an outline can help because it consists of actual writing, but when it does not help enough, you should write down your ideas freely or randomly. Step back and imagine explaining your topic to a friend. Aim merely to get some sentences written; you can re-sort and refine your ideas later.

8. As you write, keep thinking about your subject, pushing your ideas further. Most of us don't know exactly what we think about a complex

subject until we start to articulate our thoughts. Writing itself becomes a discovery process of which we should take full advantage. Check your logic by sketching an outline of what you have written. Polish your first paragraph and conclusion. Consider some larger questions about your approach. Is it mainly historical or formalistic? Are you interested in the cultural identity of the film? If you are emphasizing a particular method, decide to what extent your approach should be acknowledged early in your paper.

9. Regularly save and back up all your writing on your computer.

10. Revise; always revise. Allow as much time as possible between your first draft and your revision of it, preferably a few days. No one writes a perfect draft the first time, and most good writers go through several drafts before they feel comfortable and secure with an essay. If you grow weary, remind yourself: Film scripts may be subjected to a dozen rewrites before a director starts to film, and once the film is made, its editing may become another series of revisions. The time you allow between your first draft and your revision should permit you to look at the essay with fresh eyes. Check your logic, topic sentences, and thesis statement (Does it still fit the paper you wrote?). Check to see that you argue and develop your thesis rather than merely assert it. Reading through the essay, watch for awkward expressions, poor transitions between sentences and paragraphs, and imprecise words. Are your examples still relevant? Are your quotations accurate? If you have time, put the paper aside again, and then do one last revision.

*NOTE: It is very important that you revise at least one draft on a hard copy rather than directly on the computer, since errors are easier to spot when the writing is in hard copy.*

11. Print out a clean copy, following the guidelines about margins, footnotes, and so on (see pp. 157–171). Be certain you are not breaking or bending any rules about plagiarism (see pp. 160–167).

12. Proofread your final copy, and insert any necessary corrections (see pp. 158–159).

## Exercises

1. Outline an argument for an essay using headings and subheadings for each section. Use full topic sentences for the headings.
2. Write three different versions of an introductory paragraph so that the thesis becomes more and more specific with each version.