

Introduction & Conclusions

engl 281 / sec. D / autumn quarter 2009-10 / chang

INTRODUCTIONS

1. Engages the Reader and Creates a Context for your Argument

Your essay should draw your readers into your paper and “convince” them to continue reading it. If you are thinking of a paper as a seduction of the reader, then the introduction is your opening line. The first job of the introduction is to grab the reader’s attention.

Make sure to answer the following questions for your reader: Why are you talking about discrimination and stereotyping in the entertainment industry (or whatever topic you decide to focus on)? Why does it matter?
Note: This is not the place, however, to make broad generalizations about society, the world, human beings, etc.

2. Tells the Reader What You are Going to Argue (your claim) and How

An argumentative essay is not a mystery novel. Make sure your reader knows what your argument is and how you are planning to prove it. You want to engage your reader as quickly as possible and to orient him/her to your attitude towards your subject. Your introduction must have a clear claim, demonstrate a compelling exigence, and identify for the reader where you stand on the matter at hand.

Consider the following first sentences. Are they broad or specific? Do they give you an idea what the essay will be about? Do they make you want to keep reading?

“As television, the Clarence Thomas/ Anita Hill hearings played beautifully as an episode right out of ‘The Twilight Zone.’”

“We know her story, and some of us, although not all of us, which was to become one of the story’s equivocal aspects, know her name.”

“The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.”

“During the course of their lives, people move into, out of, and through communities of practice, continually transforming identities, understandings, and worldviews.”

“Whenever the subject of literacy comes up, what often pops first into my mind is a conversation I overheard eight years ago between my son Sam and his best friend, Willie, aged six and seven, respectively.”

CONCLUSIONS

Unfortunately, there is no easy formula for writing conclusions. It is one of the hardest things to do well. Some strategies you might find useful are listed below:

Don’t just repeat what you’ve already said

If your conclusion says almost exactly the same thing as your introduction, it may indicate that you have not done enough critical thinking during the course of your essay (since you ended up right back where you started). By the end of your essay, you should have worked through your ideas enough so that your reader understands what you have argued and is ready to hear the larger point (i.e. the big “so what?”) you want to make about your topic. Your conclusion should create a sense of development or movement to a more complex understanding of the subject of your paper.

Try to pull everything together

Your conclusion should serve as the climax of your paper. So, save your strongest analytical points for the end of your essay, and use them to drive your conclusion.

Don't be afraid to say something new

It is fine to introduce new information or quotations in your conclusion, as long as the new points grow from your argument. New points might be more general, answering the “so what” question; they might be quite specific. Just avoid making new claims that need additional support

Go out with a “bang”

Vivid, concrete language is as important in a conclusion as it is elsewhere—perhaps more essential, since the conclusion determines the reader’s final impression of your essay. Do not leave them with the impression that your argument was vague or unsure.

Take a look at five different conclusions that could grow from the same introduction. How has the author maintained continuity and/or developed the argument from the introduction? How was the author developed a focus over the course of the essay? What impression does each conclusion leave you with as a reader?

Introduction

We all know that textbooks dry history out completely, dehydrating the gripping stories and critical conflicts of the past to a dusty piece of history leather—tough, nasty, and hard to digest. As I reviewed three accounts of expansion in the western United States, I found some signs of life in the desert; compared to the texts I reviewed for our last adoption, the new textbooks offered more complete accounts and stronger analysis of the interactions between settlers and Native Americans, race and gender dynamics in the west, and the role of the federal government in all phases of western settlement. We have a much more palatable assortment of facts for our students to chew on, but is it any more substantial? Here, I question which of these texts will allow us to teach not just the facts but the skills—reading, writing, questioning, and thinking critically—which we as a committee have decided should take precedence in our classes.

Concluding with Questions

Which of these texts is best? The colorful pictures and graphics, the clear prose, the primary documents all have their appeal. But these tasty morsels distract us from asking the real question—what are we teaching for? If we want our students to think like historians, then Land of the Free’s liberal use of primary documents, the very same documents historians use to construct the past, makes it our best choice.

Concluding with Quotation

To inspire critical thinking, we need materials that can help us move beyond the textbooks and engage our students’ creativity. Of the three texts I reviewed, only Oh Say Can You See included a variety of supplementary materials to spice up our classes, from primary documents and historical film clips to art slides and CD-ROMs. In short, the variety of extra resources makes this textbook our best option, for it allows us the potential to revise John F. Kennedy’s famous plea, “ask not what your textbook can do for you, ask what you can do for your textbook.”

Concluding with a Vivid Image

I remember what made history matter to me; as a high school student, I found the diary my grandmother kept during the depression. I carried that little leather-bound book with me everywhere, poring over its contents, seeking connections between my family’s past, my country’s past, and myself. If we want to inspire our students to move from memorizing facts to developing an interest in history, I recommend A More Perfect Union as our choice. This text’s attention to emotionally touching photographs and personal stories of the west offers us the best hope of enabling our students to make a personal connection with the past.

Concluding with a Call to Action/Connecting to Larger Issues

Clearly, all three of the textbooks currently up for adoption have major flaws—but is it our responsibility to take these foundlings in and spend hours of quality time working with them? Instead of squandering our economic clout on these sub-standard texts, we can protest. Let’s delay the adoption until next year and lobby the textbook companies to give us what we want—textbooks that will give us history colored in all of its complexity, conflict, and compromise. In this way, perhaps we can inspire our students as well.