Jacobson Center for Writing, Teaching and Learning
The Writing Process Series: # 4

Writing: Introduction and Conclusions

Introductions and conclusions are not just paragraphs that occur at the beginning and end of a paper. They form a dynamic partnership that encloses and enhances an argument. By moving between them, revising each in light of the other, you can clarify your point and clinch your argument. Let's move between an introduction and conclusion of our own.

Rough Introduction:

America is stronger today because of the contributions of other cultures, like Columbus, the Italian, who claimed the New World for Spain. So we should be thankful, not angry with immigrants who pursue the American dream. My Aunt Gina, poor and hungry, came from Sicily in 1945. Mussolini had been deposed. World War II was over. To New York she came and went to work for a small importer of Sicilian olive oil. The company is worth millions today, and her contributions can't be discounted, nor can the contributions of all the others before her or after her. That's why it's wrong to put limits on immigration, though illegal immigration is another matter.

This introduction is rough because it raises too many questions. Is this a paper about Aunt Gina or immigration? How relevant is Columbus? Do we need to hear so much about World War II? Generalizations such as "the American dream" only add to the fuzzy effect. Illegal immigration may be pertinent, but is it central?

You may wish to stop everything and revise such an introduction, and you're not wrong to feel that way—but don't do it yet. Go back later when the meaning of the paper has emerged, when it's easier to know how to revise. In other words, write all the way through to the conclusion just to see how your thinking comes out.

Strange as it may sound, a conclusion is the best friend an introduction has. In writing a conclusion, the writer often draws together ideas and draws out the most significant implications. Let's see what an early conclusion to the paper about Aunt Gina (or is it about immigration?) looks like:

Like many immigrants, both legal and illegal, Aunt Gina worked for years at rock bottom wages. Without low wage workers the U.S. economy would undergo a wrenching transformation; many Americans, not just immigrants, would suffer the consequences. In spite of her value to the economy, Gina and others like her have been the targets of campaigns of hate. Anti-immigration hysteria that scapegoats newcomers doesn't make America stronger. It makes America weaker.

Here the writer identifies her subject, the bashing of immigrants and punitive anti-immigration legislation. She's also made clear what's at stake, the health of the American economy, no less. Now it's time to revise the introduction so that it works more closely with the conclusion, so that they fit.

If, in an early draft, you address your main idea for the first time in the conclusion, or address it with greater effectiveness, why fight it? Such a conclusion might make a fine introduction, so move it to the beginning and revise it, and no one will know the difference! But that requires writing a new conclusion, of course, preferably one that really concludes. Too often, even in revised papers, the last paragraph is a restatement of the first. This creates the impression that in spite of all the ground a paper has covered the argument has arrived nowhere.

Why not tailor the introduction to fit the conclusion? If the conclusion delivers an answer, ask an appropriate question (for example, “Does immigration harm the U.S. economy or help it?”), and place the question in the introduction. You can also restate the question as an issue the paper will resolve. Even if a conclusion raises new, but related issues, or examines the significance of what has been learned, these elements can help a writer craft an opening that anticipates the main point without giving the game away.

Revised introduction:

When I think of the immigrant experience, I think of Aunt Gina. After World War II, she left Sicily for New York and went to work for a small importer of olive oil. The company is worth millions today, and her contributions to its success, while modest, can’t be discounted. The truth is that Aunt Gina worked all her life for low pay. Now, in the wake of political campaigns against “illegal immigrants,” and the enactment of laws that punish legal and illegal immigrants alike, the real contributions of low wage workers to American prosperity are being cynically overlooked.

Happily, Columbus is gone. So is the extraneous stuff about World War II. Illegal and legal immigrants fall under one category now—low wage workers whose contributions to American *prosperity* (not the “American dream”) are too often overlooked.

Once you’re happy with the introduction, it’s time to polish the conclusion, starting with the first line. Avoid the formulaic: “In conclusion,” “To sum up,” “In summary,” or “Thus we see that…” The alert reader will know that the conclusion has arrived by the fact that there are no more pages left. Concentrate instead on a transition that engages the main idea, improves the fit.

Sometimes writers like to close with a quotation, and it’s fine if you do that, but be sure it amplifies the main point or puts things in perspective. Too often, a closing quotation has a “So what?” effect, especially if it restates points already established.

Indeed, “So what?” is a useful question to ask when ending a paper. Where has the argument of the paper taken us? Redefining the key terms of an argument can accomplish the same effect, especially when the redefinition answers the question, "So what?" and reveals the significance of your thesis.

Remember: The introduction and conclusion of a paper are your first and last chance to persuade the reader. Be sure to make the most of the opportunities they present.