

Introductions, Thesis Statements, and Outlines

When writing essays, it is very important to develop an effective introductory paragraph and thesis statement. Since this is the first impression you make on your reader (or grader), you want to make it a good one; you want to entice him* into reading what you have written and give him* a taste of where you are going and why.

The following are examples of introductory paragraphs that introduce the thesis that General Robt. E. Lee's behavior at the close of the Civil War was a significant factor in reconciling the two sides after the war. The thesis statements are in boldface:

At the close of the Civil War the most admired man in the Confederacy was 'Marse Robert', the general commanding the Army of Northern Virginia, Robert E. Lee. The popular and moral authority he held over his troops and the public at large made his reaction to the end of the war a significant factor in the view southerners would have about the end of the war. **It was the humanity, good sense, and grace with which Lee accepted the defeat that provided the critical factor in allowing the South to accept its fate. (An alternative): By his actions in ending the war, the moral leadership he demonstrated as an individual, and the actions he took to influence public opinion after the war, Lee was a critical factor in the success of the reuniting of the country.** This last thesis sentence prefigures the major parts of your argument.

At Appomattox Courthouse on April 9, 1865 Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to U.S. Grant. Though the South was defeated, it was unbowed and angry, and the tinder of further rebellion was strewn across the land from Virginia to Florida. **As the most influential and respected man in the Confederacy, Lee's view of the end of the war was vital to the response of his comrades and fellow citizens, and his good sense and humanity was a significant factor in allowing southerners to reconcile themselves to their defeat.**

At morning service in the half-ruined church in Richmond on a Sunday in late April 1865, the preacher made the altar call for communion. From the back of the church strode a middle-aged Negro to the altar. Stunned, the congregation was silent and immobile. Then from a pew near the front rose a tall, erect gentleman with white hair and full grey beard. He walked to the rail and knelt next to the Negro. **By this personal display of magnanimity and other actions he took, Robert E. Lee, the most respected man in the South, was a critical factor in ensuring that the ending of the Civil War would heal the rift between the two sides rather than result in further bloody confrontation.**

Each of these beginnings in its own way sets the stage for your thesis and your thesis sets the stage for the rest of your piece. You would then divide the paper into sections that explain the various ways that Lee confirms the thesis you have chosen. (The last version is an example of an anecdotal 'hook' that is hard to pull off but can create considerable interest immediately. You have only to look at the front page of a good newspaper on any given day to see how journalists make use of this technique.)

Outlines

Preparing a good outline for yourself is one of the best ways for you to ensure that your paper will be coherent and well written. Think of your paper as a journey to a goal. If you don't know where you are going at the outset, there's no way you will get there. Additionally, if you don't know how to get to your goal, you and your reader will get lost or run off in a ditch. That's not good for effective communications or good grades. A good outline will give you the roadmap for your paper and be a real help in writing it. The more work you spend on it, the easier time you will have writing and fleshing out your paper.

Topic Sentences

Your thesis sets the tone and direction for your paper. The topic sentence does the same for the paragraph. Each paragraph must stand alone as a coherent thought with a topic sentence and argument supporting it. **Therefore, writing good topic sentences is the key to writing the building blocks of your paper, good paragraphs.**

This method of writing sounds sort of mechanical, but approaching it in this way can be really helpful when you first get started. Once you get better at it, you can develop your own style. **Varying your topic sentences, putting them at the beginning of the paragraph, the end, or the middle like this one, can be an important way to vary the way you write.** As you get more comfortable using the building blocks, you can branch out and experiment with ways to say what you want, and will take satisfaction with your increased abilities as you practice and master the basics of communicating via the written word.

*(Notice I have avoided the extremely awkward 'him or her' phrase by the literary technique of synecdoche-or having the part stand for the whole)