

# Writing an Introduction

Daniel Hoek — Proseminar — Spring 2024

Draft date (optional): February 12, before class

Due date: February 16 at 8pm

Word count: 500-1,000 words.

Your task is to write an introduction to an (as yet non-existent) paper about our topic. A good introduction explains exactly what the paper will do, and gets the reader excited about doing that.

Here is a good template for a philosophy paper introduction:<sup>1</sup>

- ▶ *Paragraph 1.* The first paragraph of your paper should *entice* the reader into thinking about the topic at hand, for instance by introducing an appealing example to get the reader's thoughts going.
- ▶ *Paragraph 2.* Clearly articulates the driving question of the paper and establishes your paper's *contribution* to that question. Most often a philosophy paper defends a certain thesis. In that case, the thesis should be clearly stated in the first or second paragraph. (If you're doing something else, e.g. presenting a new solution to a puzzle, you may require more exposition.)
- ▶ *Paragraph 3.* Situates the paper's contribution relative to the *literature* on a topic. (This need not be a long list: it could be that you're just responding to one particular paper or philosopher.)
- ▶ *Paragraph 4 and further*
  - ▶ These *summarise* the core ideas and moves in the paper. Don't leave room for suspense: tell the reader everything that will happen. I often structure my papers like a kind of Russian doll: the introduction is a summary of the paper, the abstract is a summary of the introduction, and the title is a summary of the abstract.
  - ▶ This part of the paper also explains the *structure of the paper*, telling the reader what you will do in each section. This "table of contents" *orients* the reader so they do not get lost in the subsequent paper. It is the first part of effective *signposting*. If done well, this part of the introduction seamlessly dovetails with the summary of the paper, rather than doubling up. (This should come quite naturally if the structure of the paper matches the form of the argument — as it should!)
- ▶ *Final paragraph* (optional). Having explained the structure, you may just dive right into Section I. But you can also use this space to draw attention to some cool upshot(s) of your conclusion, hint at a further application, or in some other way indicate why your contribution is exciting.

You may diverge from this format when you have a good reason. For instance, if your paper is a direct response to someone else's argument or theory, you may want to swap paragraph 2 and 3, because your contribution is best explained relative to the view to which you are responding. Sometimes, the question is appealing enough to speak for itself and you can dive right in, skipping paragraph 1. Short papers may omit the summary and other parts.

As you see, an introduction has a lot of different aims! Writing an effective introduction requires you to get very precise about what your paper is *for*. Your view of the paper's point tends to evolve in the writing. So often you substantially re-write the introduction afterwards, when you find out that what you've done is different from what you set out to do. Still, it is good to set out with a clear plan and purpose in mind! This is why I often start a paper project by writing an introduction for it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on a template by Tom Dougherty, via Jordan MacKenzie.