

6. THE IMPORTANCE OF INTRODUCTIONS

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“A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism.”

—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*
(1848)

A powerful introduction is the most important tool that a writer can use to capture the reader’s attention. For example, consider the first line of the “Manifesto of the Communist Party.” Marx and Engels wrote this informational manifesto to rally the working classes of Europe and the world. The first few lines immediately capture the reader. There is mystery and the statement elicits more questions. It is powerful and daring. Imagine if they had begun dryly by stating, “In this manifesto, we want to tell you the current status of communism in Europe.” Not as eloquent, not as impactful, and not as effective.

When I write, I think a lot about what kind of story I want to tell. Even a sociological academic paper must develop a narrative, as we are telling sociological stories and we need to pay attention to our audience and guide them through our ideas and research in a way that is factual as well as compelling. In this chapter, I will cover three elements that a good introduction should have: (1) it should capture the reader’s attention, (2) it should clearly state the research question or thesis guiding the paper, and (3) it should provide a roadmap for the rest of the paper.

CAPTURE THE READERS’ ATTENTION

Your first goal should be capture the reader’s attention so they keep reading past the first sentence and the first paragraph. Think about Marx and Engels’s goal of global reach with their manifesto. You need to begin your essays, papers, thesis, by capturing the attention of your audience. You should assume that the reader (even if it is your professor) does not have extensive knowledge about your topic or that the readers might not be interested in your topic. Here are four useful techniques when you want to capture the reader’s attention.

The Vignette

An anecdote consists of a personal story about someone. It might come from a friend or family member you know, from a story published in the news, or from your own data (if you are required to collect primary data, such as an interview or participant observations). If you begin your introduction with an anecdote, it should be one that represents some of the key themes of the paper. Below is an example, where I begin an article talking about the story of Jacinto, a migrant who lived in the United States for 18 years, returned to Mexico, and was living in a border city when I interviewed him.

Jacinto arrived in the United States with his parents as an 8-month-old baby. When he turned 18, he realized that he was undocumented: he could not legally drive, hold a job, or attend school. He felt as if he couldn't do anything, that he was "too *encerrado* [caged]." When I met him he was 21, living on the U.S.-Mexico border in Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico, separated from his parents and his brother and sister. He says he feels happier because he has more rights, but he is lonely. He talks with his family daily on the phone, but he still misses the daily interactions. He reminisces, "[I miss] hugging them, kissing them. When we were together in the U.S. we would come home at night and watch TV, eat, we were always together, all three siblings, talking, chattering. We would talk to my dad, we would always talk to my dad. We had good communication, we had a great relationship." He cannot have both the freedom he desires as a new adult and the day-to-day connection with his family (Sarabia 2017).

Jacinto's story is emotional and personal. But it also reflected the experiences of many of the other participants I interviewed for the same project—all of them were immigrants who grew up in the United States, felt limited by U.S. legal immigration laws, decided to return to Mexico, and had to leave their family behind in the U.S. Readers understand that Jacinto's dilemma, and this prepares them to contemplate the themes I identify in the course of the article.

When you do not have interview data, you could begin by telling the story of someone you know personally. For example, "When my mother kissed her mother goodbye, she never imagined it would be for the last time. She was leaving Mexico to go to the United States, but she was sure they would meet again." You can also use anecdotes found in current events, by

using something from newspapers or social media. For example,

Focused on the continuous battle to fund a concrete border wall, President Donald Trump tweeted on March 15, 2019, "I'd like to thank all of the Great Republican Senators who bravely voted for Strong Border Security and the WALL. This will help stop Crime, Human Trafficking, and Drugs entering our Country. Watch, when you get back to your State, they will LOVE you more than ever before!" (Trump 2019).

Anecdotes that appear at the beginning of your article should connect to your larger point, but do so by making your findings or your ideas personal to the reader. Short, concrete anecdotes are effective because they draw on the personal and particular, and you can use that to then build on the general and sociological.

Statistics

Another way to begin an essay or thesis is to draw from numbers, especially if those numbers are surprising. For example, in the introduction below, we draw on the large number of protesters during the immigrant-rights marches of 2006 to capture the attention of the reader:

In the spring of 2006, between 3.7 and 5 million people took to the streets to rally for immigrant rights in the United States. They protested the House of Representatives' passage of legislation that targeted undocumented residents and they called for a path to citizenship to bring an estimated 10 to 12 million unauthorized residents "out of the shadows." The legislative bill, H.R. 4437, was defeated, a victory for the power and political voice of these immigrants and their allies. Yet comprehensive immigration reform

remains in the shadows of the law as deportations have climbed since 2006. What do these events teach us about citizenship, power, and political action? (Bloemraad, Sarabia, and Fillingim 2017).

This introduction draws from the power of the numbers (up to 5 million people on the streets on behalf of 12 million undocumented immigrants) to highlight the importance of the moment.

You could also draw on data from the government (such as the U.S. Census, Department of Homeland Security, or Department of State) to provide startling but factual figures. For example, "In 2012, about 13,000 unaccompanied children detained at the U.S.-Mexico border were referred to the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Two years later in 2014, the number quadrupled to 57,496 (ORR 2018)."

You may also find data on reports put together by research centers (such as the Pew Research Center). For example, "In 2019, the Pew Research Center reported that today most people in the United States (62%) agree that immigrants benefit and strengthen society because of their hard work and talents. But political identification and age strongly predict such views. Among Republicans, only 38% think immigrants are a strength, compared to 83% of Democrats; and among millennials (born 1981-96) 75% agree immigrants are a strength, while only 52% of Boomers (born 1946-64) agree (Jones 2019).

Statistical facts are a fast and effective way to convey general patterns in the population that the paper can then address more in depth, as you move from the general to the particular.

A Historical Moment

Shared experiences have a powerful connection to our memories and serve to capture the reader's attention. Depending on the reader's age, examples of powerful moments might be the assassinations of John F. Kennedy (1963) and Martin Luther King (1968), the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle (1986), and/or the 2001 Twin Tower attacks. Major, and even small, historical events can capture the reader's attention because of how they shape people and how they resonate in our collective memory. Here is an introduction that highlights a historical moment for undocumented immigrants in this country that indicates the rhetoric used to frame the issue of unauthorized migration:

On November 20, 2014, President Barack Obama announced a much-anticipated executive order to relieve millions of undocumented immigrants already living in the United States from deportation. At the time the order was called Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA). In his speech, he made a clear distinction between those who would benefit from DAPA and those who would still be deportable. He said, "[O]ver the past six years, deportations of criminals are up 80 percent. And that's why we're going to keep focusing enforcement resources on actual threats to our security. *Felons, not families*. Criminals, not children [emphasis added]. Gang members, not a mom who's working hard to provide for her kids. We'll prioritize, just like law enforcement does every day" (Obama 2014). Obama's speech revealed the extent to which politicians now seek to draw clear boundaries between "family members" and "criminal aliens." The former were

deserving; the latter were deportable (Sarabia 2018).

Historical moments can point to the ways the personal intersects with the historical. Many stories in newspapers today could be used to highlight a historical moment. Those that might cause outrage may be compelling to readers. For example, from the headline of the New York Times, “The U.S. government has reported that, in the past four years, it has received more than 4,500 complaints of sexual abuse of immigrant children held in government-funded detention facilities (Haag 2019); and the response of the government has been to argue that it’s ‘not responsible for staff’s sexual abuse of detainees’ (Lopez and Park 2018).”

You could also draw from local historical events that can have big impact, such as the death of a local politician, a police brutality case, or a recent demonstration or protest. Even campus “historical moments” can be very effective, depending on the audience. If you use this technique, start with the general historical event and then relate it to the particularities you will discuss in your paper or article.

A Visual Contradiction or a Perplexing Scenario

Another way you can capture a reader’s attention is by drawing a visual picture that is contradictory and that reveals much about the topic. For example, in the following introduction, I seek to highlight the contradictory opening and closing of the U.S.-Mexico border:

The U.S.-Mexico border is a contradictory region. It is at once a site of cross-border movement (e.g., goods, merchandise, capital, trade, tourists) and of walls intended to stop other flows (e.g., unauthorized migrants and illicit

substances). It is both one of the most militarized areas in the northern hemisphere and one of the most frequently crossed borders in the world. These contradictions allow some people to benefit from economic opportunities and personal options, as they are free to cross this international boundary, while others experience the border as a place of barriers and suffering. (Sarabia 2016)

By highlighting the contradictions of the U.S.-Mexico border as being simultaneously porous and militarized, I try to engage the reader by presenting a scenario that elicits more questions.

Another way to play on contradictions is to present differences as a puzzle that requires further explanation. For example, in the following introduction, I present two groups that share many things in common but also have striking differences:

In the spring of 2006, two groups of Zapatista activists in the San Francisco Bay Area were engaging in different activities. Both groups considered themselves Zapatistas, not because they were from Chiapas or indigenous, but because they were in solidarity with the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, took a strong anti-capitalist stance, and were committed to practicing non-electoral politics. This article will focus on the practices of these two Zapatista groups, the Globalizers and the Localizers, located in the global North. While the Globalizers headed to Chiapas once again with a delegation of people, the Localizers planned and discussed their participation in a local march to support immigrants in their demands for rights. Some members of the Globalizers also headed to marches and some members of the Localizers visited Chiapas, but in

general the orientations of these two groups was distinct. (Sarabia 2011)

Posing a puzzling scenario can intrigue the reader off the bat, wondering how you are going to explain, even resolve, these differences.

STATE THE RESEARCH QUESTION OR THESIS GUIDING THE PAPER

Once you have captured the reader's attention, you need to clearly state your thesis or research question. Your thesis will typically appear at the end of your paper's introduction. Your research question may appear in the same spot or, if you will be reviewing past research, after you have provided that review. A research question guides the inquiry and your paper's presentation of your findings; while your thesis consists of the argument you are making in the paper.

Here are the questions guiding the article I wrote on Zapatista solidarity:

The Globalizers focused most of their time and energy in their involvement in Chiapas, while the Localizers used most of the time in their meetings and most of their resources to focus on their involvement in their local community in the United States. If both groups identify with Zapatista idealism, what accounts for the different practices deployed by these two Zapatista groups? How does the personal biography and composition of the group members affect the understanding and activation of these different practices? (Sarabia 2011)

By introducing the research questions as a series of questions to be explored, I sought to highlight a seeming contradiction. Other chapters in this manual will explore the

elements of research questions and thesis statements further.

PROVIDE A ROADMAP TO THE REST OF THE PAPER

Finally, an introduction should also map the rest of the paper. Tell us what you plan to cover and the argument driving the thesis. For example, here is how I structured the map of the article for the Zapatista piece:

First, I show how transnational ideological and political influences flow from the Global South to the Global North. Second, I show the different transnational practices carried out by the members of the two groups [the *Globalizers* and the *Localizers*]. Finally, I argue that certain structures, in this case, citizenship status and economic class, shape transnational practices. (Sarabia 2011)

The first section corresponds to the literature review; the second to the study findings; and the third to the discussions and conclusions. However, describing the content of the different sections is more likely interest the reader than mentioning these basic components.

Throughout the introduction it is important to make a deep first impression by engaging your readers. Your professor may have to keep reading the entire assignment, but if you write in a clear and engaging manner, they may actually *want* to keep reading. And once you have mastered that skill, of engaging readers and encouraging them to continue reading, you will be ready to reach a wider audience with any piece of writing.

OTHER RESOURCES:

* Find anecdotes in newspapers like: *Sac State Hornet* (<https://statehornet.com/>), the *Sacramento Bee* (<https://www.sacbee.com/>), the *Los Angeles Times* (<https://www.latimes.com/>), the *Washington Post* (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/>), or the *New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/>).

* Find statistics online at places like: the U.S. Census (<https://www.census.gov/>), other governmental institutions (like The Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Department of Justice, or the Department of Homeland Security), or research centers such as the Pew Research Center (<https://www.pewresearch.org/>).

* Read more about writing an engaging introduction on the Grammarly Blog: <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/how-to-write-an-introduction/>

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