

How to Write Introductions and Conclusions

Introductions and conclusions can be tricky to write. They do not contain the main substance of your assignment, but they do play a key role in helping the reader navigate your writing.

The usual advice is

- Introduction: say what you're going to say
- Main body: say it
- Conclusion: say that you've said it

However, this approach can feel repetitive and is not very rewarding to write or read.

A more engaging approach is to think about the perspective of the reader and what they need to know in order to make sense of your writing. In academic writing, it is the writer's job to make their meaning clear (unlike in literature and fiction, where it is the reader's job to interpret the meaning) so that the reader can concentrate on deciding what they think of your work and marking it.

Introductions and conclusions play an important role in explaining your aims and approach, so to help you write them well, you could think about what questions the reader has for you as they pick up your work for the first time, and when they have finished reading it.

Introductions

The introductions are the first part of your assignment that the reader encounters, so it needs to make a good impression and set the scene for what follows. Your introduction is about 10% of the total word count. It can be difficult to think what that first opening sentence should be, or what an introduction should include.

From your reader's perspective, they have three questions when they first pick up your assignment:

What are you doing?

You could approach this question in a number of ways:

- Although your lecturer knows the assignment questions they've set, they don't know how you have understood and interpreted it. To demonstrate that you've read it accurately, you can echo back the question to your reader, paraphrased in your own words so they know you have really understood it rather than just copying and pasting it.
- There might also be different ways to interpret the assignment, and clarifying for the reader how you've interpreted it would be helpful. Perhaps different angles on it are possible, there is more than one definition you could be working to, or you have been given a range of

options within the assessment brief, and you need to tell the reader which approach you are taking.

- It's also common to give a brief overview of a topic in the introduction, providing the reader with some context so they can understand what is to follow. Of course, your lecturer is already likely to know this basic information, so you could think of it as giving the reader confidence that you also share that foundational knowledge and have got your facts right. This aspect needs to be as brief as possible, as it can be very descriptive (which will not get you higher marks) and if it extends too far, can take up too much space in your essay which would be better used for analysis, interpretation or argumentation. A rough guide is to ask yourself which information is built on later in your assignment and cut anything that doesn't get 'used' later on.

Why are you doing this?

The obvious answer to this question is "because you told me to write this assignment"! A more interesting response, though, is to show that you've really understood why your lecturer has set that question and why it's worth asking. None of the questions you are set at University will be simple or straightforward, but will be complex and problematic, and many have no single clear answer or approach. In responding thoughtfully to the question "why are you doing this", you are reflecting on why it is significant, complex and worth doing, that you've understood the complexity of the assignment you've been set and recognise the lecturer's aims in setting it.

How will you do this?

Every student who answers a particular assignment will produce a different answer, with a different structure, making different points and drawing on different information. Your reader wants to know what your own particular approach to the assignment will be.

- You might answer this question in terms of what your structure is going to be, signalling how many sections you use and what order they appear in, signposting how you have broken the assignment down and organised it, so the reader knows what to expect.
- You might also explain to the reader which choices and decisions you have made to narrow it down to a manageable, focussed assignment. You might have chosen to set yourself particular limits on the scope of your assignment (for example, a focussing on a particular context, timespan, or type), or which examples and case studies you've chosen to illustrate your answer with, and why they are appropriate for this assignment.
- If relevant, you might also tell the reader about your methodology, the theories, models, definitions or approaches you have applied in order to answer the assignment question.

Your introduction may not include all these elements, or include them in the same balance or in this order, but if you address the reader's three questions, your introduction will fulfil its purpose. Make sure you're not jumping into your argument too early. Your introduction should introduce your argument but not actually do the work of making it yet; that is the job of the main body of the assignment.

Conclusions

Conclusions can feel a bit repetitive, as you need to revisit the points you've already made, but not include any new material. Again, the conclusion is usually about 10% of your total word count. The challenge is to make them engaging to read for your marker, but also interesting for you to write, so they feel purposeful. You cannot include any new material as conclusions should close a discussion down, not open up new avenues or leave points unresolved. If a point is important, it should be dealt with in the main body rather than as an afterthought.

As they read, your marker is focussing on each paragraph in detail, identifying the point you're making, analysing and evaluating the evidence you're using, and the way you explain, interpret and argue, to see if it makes sense. They're also thinking about the quality of your work and what mark they're going to give it, looking to see that you've met the marking criteria. University assignments are long enough that the reader will find it hard to give each point this kind of detailed scrutiny and keep the whole assignment in their mind at the same time. The job of the conclusion is to help them move from that close-up reading and zoom out to give them a sense of the whole.

Again, a good approach is to think of the questions that your reader has when they reach the end of your assignment.

Where are we?

Your conclusion is the overall answer to the original assignment question you were set. See if you can summarise your overall answer in one sentence. This might be the first line of your conclusion. Make sure that your concluding answer does match the question you were set in the assessment.

How did we get here?

Having told the reader where they've got to, you will need to remind them of how you got there. To strengthen their confidence in your overall answer, you can remind them of the points you made and how together they build your conclusion.

Where does that leave us?

Although you cannot include new information in your conclusion, you can show your thinking in a new light. One question your reader may have is "where does that leave me?" or "so what?". You could therefore briefly discuss the significance of your conclusion. Now that you've demonstrated your answer to the question, how does that add to our overall understanding of this topic? What do we know, what can we do now, that we couldn't before? If we hadn't explored this topic, where would we be? Why is this conclusion important? This might resolve the issues you raised in the introduction when you answered the question 'why am I doing this?'

What next?

A possible follow-on to this question is to examine what work might come next, if you didn't have time constraints or word limits. This is particularly relevant in second and third year and masters level assignments, especially dissertations. This is a good way to show awareness of how your own thinking fits in the wider context of scholarship and research and how it might be developed. It might be a way to touch on aspects you had to cut out, or areas you couldn't cover.

When to write the introduction and conclusion

You don't have to write your assignment in order. If you find that the introduction is hard to start, then you could write it at the end of the process, which will ensure that it matches the assignment you've actually written. However, it might be a useful approach to at least begin by thinking about the introduction questions above, as it will help you in the planning process. Likewise, you could start with writing the conclusion if you have done extensive thinking and planning, as formulating your end goal might help to keep you on track (although be open to your overall answer changing a little in the process). Again, thinking about the conclusion questions above at the start of the process is a useful planning tool to clarify your thinking, even if you don't write it until the end.