



INTRODUCTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The length of the introduction and conclusion should be in proportion to the length of the whole essay or assignment. For each one you should decide what percentage of the total word count you think they should be:

a	Introduction:	5-10%	10-15%	15-20%
b	Conclusion:	5-10%	10-15%	15-20%

Introduction

A good introduction fulfils the following four requirements:

1. It **engages** the reader's interest by using simple, strong sentences. A provocative, quirky or surprising first statement can be effective here.
2. It **introduces** the topic (gives a bit of background if necessary, puts the topic in context, comments on the significance of the topic).
3. It provides a **focus statement** or **thesis** for the essay. This can be a presentation of the main argument or conclusion of the essay. Often, key words from the question will appear in the focus statement, but the writer's own words are always used. A good focus statement expresses a clear point of view.
4. It gives the reader some understanding of the **order** in which the ideas in the essay will be developed.

An introduction should explain what the rest of the essay will contain, by outlining the structure.

Examples

"In this essay..."

"...will be shown/presented/explained/argued/discussed..."

"...followed by an explanation/discussion/presentation of..."

"...in order to show/explain/present..."

Note: Some departments do not like the use of "I" in academic writing, but some prefer it because it gives the writer full responsibility for the work. You will have to find out what style your department prefers, and be consistent throughout.



Related resources:

Structure of an essay
Structure of a paragraph

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Example of an introduction

Look now at an opening paragraph from an essay in a Greek civilization course. The lecturer's comment on this was: "A superb introduction: clear, intelligent and perceptive."

Topic

Fifth century Athens is usually considered to have been the birthplace of 'democracy', but the term 'democracy' has come to have a variety of connotations. Discuss the nature of Athenian democracy of the 5th century B.C.: its ideals and its actual workings. (Useful comparisons or contrasts with modern democracy will be welcomed but not obligatory).



Introduction

The Athenian constitution of the fifth century was remarkable for the democratic principles it embodied – hitherto unheard of. The ideals of any society are difficult to evaluate without over-simplification: however, four main principles can be discerned in fifth century Athens: sovereignty of the citizens, equality, liberty, and justice for the citizens. A greater insight into the nature of the democracy can be achieved by examination of its more important institutions: the Assembly, electoral eligibility, electoral method, duration of office, ostracism and the liturgies. In this century some have disputed the validity of Athenian democracy, one reason being the exclusion of women, metics, and slaves from participating in government. However, the difference between fifth century Athenian government and a Western twentieth century democracy lies not essentially in the theory behind the constitution but in the definition of a citizen.

Here you have been given an impression of the probable development of the whole essay: a discussion of the nature of Athenian democracy, looking at its principles and its major institutions; then an examination of modern criticisms of the political system; and, finally some comparison between Athenian democracy and modern theories of democracy. Notice also how skilfully the writer has suggested the order in which she will develop her ideas, without explicitly saying 'First', 'Second', 'Third', 'Next', 'Finally', etc.

Conclusion

A good conclusion has similar tasks:

1. It sums up the essay's **main points**. This is done concisely, focusing only on main arguments – the conclusions should not rehash every argument made in the essay.
2. It restates the essay's **main argument** or **conclusion**. Use different phrasing than you used in the introduction. Use phrases like, "This essay has demonstrated how...", "Clearly, the evidence demonstrates..." etc.
3. It leaves the reader with a **sense of satisfaction** - of an argument having been brought to its logical conclusion, of the question having been answered.

A **conclusion should not** introduce new material.

While your conclusion is shaped by the need to reacquaint your reader with the major themes of the essay and your overall point of view, the actual strategies for concluding may be as varied as those introductory strategies we examined earlier.

Example of a conclusion

Here is a conclusion which seems to work well. The writer not only takes us back to the central terms of the topic but also makes clear that his exploration of the topic has led him to a re-definition of it. The central question of slavery, he suggests, is never one of relative degrees of economic advantage to the slavers.

Topic

What were the unique features of slavery in the British North American colonies, as contrasted with slavery in the French, Spanish, and Portuguese colonies? Under which colonial slave system would it have been preferable to be a slave?



Conclusion

So the question of which was the preferable slave system is really unanswerable. It would depend on what was of prime importance to the individual, the greater chance of legally acquiring his freedom or the stronger possibility of survival. In practical terms the overall deciding factor in the actual treatment of slaves was the economic one. In French, Spanish and Portuguese colonies it was cheaper to replenish stocks of slave by purchasing rather than breeding them. In North America it was generally found a better policy to look after the slaves one had and to foster their breeding. In the long term

Another strategy is simply to refer to a key word or phrase in your introduction. Or you can relate the structure of your conclusion to the structure of your opening.

Example of an introduction and a conclusion

Here is an example of this technique from a student's History essay.

Topic: What did the work of Caroline Chisholm do for the position of women in Colonial Society?

Introduction

The philanthropic works of Caroline Chisholm in the 19th century were held in high esteem by her contemporaries. She was known as the messenger of mercy, a benefactress, and as a redresser of female wrongs. Mrs Chisholm was no radical and undertook this work purely on humanitarian grounds. Her dearest wish, after helping immigrant young women on arrival in the colony of New South Wales, was that they should marry and procreate, thus establishing the family as a stabilising influence in that untamed land.

She firmly believed that wives and children – God's police – would bring about a new society. There is no doubt that Mrs Chisholm elevated the position of women by her deeds. By sheltering these young women on arrival at Sydney she no doubt saved many from a questionable fate. Her presence at the wharves and the realisation that someone cared about their welfare must surely have given hope to many a destitute

Conclusion

The answer to the question: “What did Caroline Chisholm’s work do for the position of colonial women?” is twofold. Through her love of mankind she endeavoured to make life better for women in the way she and her generation understood. Her unceasing efforts to help young immigrant women who were abandoned in Sydney by providing them with love, food, shelter and employment was the first step. Her perseverance with government officials to gain help and point out injustices must have helped the women’s plight. By her faith and determination – which she believed was derived from divine inspiration – by her understanding of the needs of the women in the colony, and by great personal sacrifice, Caroline Chisholm did much to raise the accepted standard of women in colonial society. By preventing exploitation of the immigrant women on arrival at Sydney, she offered these young women an independence that was needed to lift their class. Unfortunately, she only anticipated this independence as transitional to the ultimate goal of marriage. Marriage, like whoredom, can also be experienced as a yoke around the neck. Women were placed in this new role under men’s terms. They were to be at the beck and call of their husbands and children with all independence, identity and originality stripped from them. It is ironic that in the process of shaking off one stigma they had taken on another. Perhaps the price to pay was too great?

The opening paragraph begins appropriately, with the writer placing her subject in an historical context. She then sketches the basis for contemporary views of Caroline Chisholm’s work. Finally, (the conjunction ‘yet’ signals a change in direction) the writer raises a number of questions, suggesting the need for a reassessment of Caroline Chisholm’s work.

The concluding paragraph closely reflects the structure of the introduction, though there are subtle differences in the strength of the views advanced in each. The first half of the paragraph affirms contemporary views of Caroline Chisholm. That part of the case, at least, has been established. The second half of the paragraph firmly answers the questions raised in the second half of the introduction. The writer concludes that Caroline Chisholm was an agent of another, more subtle, exploitation than the one she attacked. By creating a conclusion which reflects so closely the structure and central themes of her introduction, this writer has given the whole essay a sense of unity and completeness.