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The Importance of Devoting Attention to Students'

Introductory Paragraphs

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Abstract

In Writing Center tutoring sessions, many tutors devote their time and attention to helping students with their papers' body rather than the introductory paragraph. While the body of a paper is certainly important, the weight an introduction carries should not be overlooked. Studies show that the quality of an introduction can determine the overall quality of the paper.

Furthermore, students who receive instruction and assistance with writing and improving their opening paragraphs perform better on their papers than students who do not. Tutors should dedicate a portion of their tutoring session to working with students on their introductory paragraphs to ensure students understand the significance of having a well-written beginning of their paper.

Key words: introductions, tutoring, introductory paragraphs

I slid the student's paper closer to my seat and began reading aloud her opening paragraph as she outlined the imbalance in attention given to popular sports, such as football, as opposed to less-popular sports, such as cross country. The paragraph suddenly shifted to the lack of recognition for women's sports as opposed to men's sports, and concluded with the declaration that we should not have this issue in today's day and age. Confused as to what the student's argument was, I paused at the end of her introductory paragraph and turned to the girl.

"This is a really interesting and relevant topic," I said, trying to ease her obvious anxiety. "I think you've got the makings of a great essay. Now, if you could summarize your introduction in one sentence, what would it be?"

"Do you mean like my thesis statement?" she asked. I nodded, and she picked up the paper and began scanning it.

"I think I have a thesis right here," she said. She pointed to the concluding sentence, but then hesitated, rearing her hand back. She looked her first paragraph over, reading every sentence, before turning to me with a sheepish grin.

"Maybe...maybe I don't have one," she said. "My introduction's kind of all over the place, isn't it?"

I gave her a reassuring smile.

"That's okay," I said. "It's just a rough draft. Would you like to use part of this session to work on your introduction? We could draft a thesis statement and then work to match your introduction with your thesis."

She nodded, and we began brainstorming potential thesis statements and argument points. We then turned to her opening paragraph as a whole, and I explained that it needed to build up to her thesis in a way that is both productive and easy to follow. After fifteen minutes, we had not

only drafted a working thesis statement that covered the basis of her argument in a clear, concise way, but also revised her first paragraph to better support and lead into her thesis. She was then able to use her new introductory paragraph to springboard into the remainder of her paper.

As writing tutors, we tend to focus more on the content of a paper's body, and for good reason. The body is the meat of a paper; it carries the argument, tells the story, or states the information. Therefore, attention should be directed to these paragraphs to ensure the student is delivering their content in a way that is effective and cohesive. However, this doesn't mean that tutors should skim over the rest of the paper, especially the opening of the paper. The introductory paragraph is not just there for decoration. A high-quality introduction must "clearly identify the substance or content of the essay...[and] achieve two additional purposes: it must entice the reader to read on and, crucially, the introduction must establish authority for the context to come" (Brown 654). How writers frame their argument in the opening paragraph can affect the overall delivery of their argument throughout the rest of the paper. Therefore, tutors should make an effort to devote attention during a session to helping a student revise and edit their introduction.

Tutors typically skim the first paragraph and then focus their attention on addressing issues with content and organization found in the body paragraphs. However, if a tutor comes across a paper in which the content in the first paragraph appears unclear, then the tutor should pause the session to address this issue. In my first tutoring sessions, I would read introductions that were vague or downright unclear, but I would keep trucking along through the paper in hopes that the body paragraphs would somehow fix the lack of clarity. They rarely did, and I would spend the remainder of the session helping the student to organize their argument in their paper's body, disregarding the confusing introduction altogether.

Now, I am not saying that choosing to focus on addressing problems within the body paragraphs is a poor choice, because it is not. The body contains the bulk of a student's argument, so it is only natural to focus a tutoring conference on the body. What is a poor choice is neglecting an introductory paragraph that is clearly in need of attention, and devoting all the session's time to the paper's body. Dismissing the beginning of the paper for the body paragraphs reinforces the notion that when revising a paper, students should only review their main argument. Students then fail to revise their opening paragraph, and continue to turn in papers with substandard introductions. The tutor should do their part to remind students of the weight that beginning of their paper can carry. Introductory paragraphs either entice a reader to read more or turn a reader off. A study conducted on the impact of teaching students how to write introductions found that a "sample of 32 academics in a British university identified poor introductions as the fifth most frequent source of frustration in marking student essays... In contrast, the same academics identified well-constructed introductions as the third most frequent feature that impressed them" (Brown 654). The opening paragraph sets the tone and expectations for the remainder of the paper; therefore, students should understand its significance

If, when reading a paper, the tutor notices glaring errors in an introduction, then the tutor should devote a portion of the session to helping a student correct those errors. This does not need to be a long portion of the session; five minutes would suffice, but tutors do a disservice to the student by skipping over the beginning of the paper and directing all energy on revising the body paragraphs. Studies show that "explicit instruction [of introductions], the provision of exemplars, peer- and self-review and constructive feedback have been identified as important for student learning" (Brown 655). Taking a few minutes to walk students through brainstorming or revising their introductory paragraph helps students to not only improve their current

introduction, but provides students with a foundation for “writing stronger introductions effectively and correctly” (Gangubai 19). It has been proven that students who receive instruction on writing opening paragraphs have “statistically significant higher grades” than fellow peers who do not receive instruction (Brown 654). Tutoring students on writing high-quality introductions sets students up for success and moves students toward the goal of becoming independent writers.

Of course, this is easier said than done. In a twenty to twenty-five-minute session, it can feel overwhelming to try and cover revising both the opening and body paragraphs. The tutor should assess the situation, particularly the student’s writing ability and major concerns with their paper, the assignment description, the paper’s length and content, and the due date. All these can factor into the direction a tutor ultimately decides to take a session in. I simply suggest that tutors consider dedicating a portion of their session to reviewing the start of the paper and teaching students not only the benefits of having a strong beginning of their paper, but techniques for improving their beginning. The weight of an introduction in an academic essay cannot be emphasized enough, as it can predict a paper’s success or failure.

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