

experiences you or others have had and which play a role in motivating and informing your upcoming discussion.

Put simply, your introduction shows how your own discussion relates to what has already been said about the subject and in doing so highlights the importance and relevance of your own contribution.

5.3 The thesis statement: what it is, where to place it and how to write it

As part of the process of providing a context for your discussion, you will, then, at some point, be indicating to your reader something about the focus of that discussion – a statement of intent, if you like. This is called the **thesis statement**, and all introductions need one.

Perhaps the simplest thesis statement – one you may well have used many times – begins with the words, ‘In this essay, I will ...’ or ‘This essay looks at ...’. It’s simple and it certainly does the job; as such, there’s nothing essentially wrong with such a thesis statement. However, while it may be perfectly fine for a high-school essay, as an undergraduate student you should be trying to develop a more sophisticated and subtle writing style, and to add more variety of expression to your repertoire. How can you do that with a thesis statement?

One strategy is to avoid such an explicit statement of intent as ‘In this essay I will ...’. Instead, try to make it obvious to your reader what you’re planning to discuss without stating it in such direct terms. Take note though: I’m not suggesting you be vague or unclear, but rather that you be more colourful in the way you express your intent. Before we look at some ways of doing this, it would be helpful to consider where in your introduction it’s best to place the thesis statement. Although, in theory, it can go almost anywhere, it typically appears either at the beginning or the end of the introduction, and there are good reasons for this.

Placing the thesis statement at or near the beginning of the introduction or at the end gives it more impact. By placing it at the beginning, with little or no prefatory discussion, you ‘hit’ the reader with it head-on. Once you’ve made clear what it is your essay will focus on, you’ll need to follow up with some contextual framing which will give meaning to your focus; it will explain or justify it. Look at this example, in which the thesis statement has been underlined:



This essay takes a critical look at arguments for and against the use of native speaker models in the teaching of English as a foreign or second language. In recent years, as a result of the growing role of English as the world’s lingua franca, a significant number of applied linguists, and to a lesser extent language teachers, are beginning to question the legitimacy

of a model of spoken English which is actually spoken by a minority of those who use English to communicate. The reality is that today more non-native speakers use English to interact with one another than native speakers, and they do so using their own varieties yet negotiating meaning perfectly effectively. For some this begs the question of why, therefore, native speaker varieties should any longer be held up as ideals to be aspired to. In contrast, there are those who feel that while these non-native speaker varieties may be widely used for business, political, educational and other purposes, they are somehow an aberration of the 'correct' or 'pure' forms of English and should not be encouraged. The issue is one over which the English language community has become increasingly polarised.

Placing the thesis statement at the end of your introduction, in contrast, builds a sense of anticipation and allows you gradually to 'draw your reader in' and guide them to the thesis statement, which slowly unfolds as they read through the introduction. It can be helpful here to think of a funnel, wide at the top and gradually narrowing at the tip. The top of the funnel represents the start of your introduction. Here, you begin to lay the groundwork for your discussion by establishing in broad terms the contextual setting into which it fits. If you imagine that there was no title, at this stage your reader may well have little or no idea about what precisely you're going to be discussing in the essay. However, gradually, that contextual information becomes more specific as you narrow your focus and home in on the particular aspect of the subject that will form the basis of your discussion in the body of the essay. And, eventually, at the narrowest point of the funnel, you let on to the reader exactly what it is your essay will focus on. This is your thesis statement, and its significance should be immediately apparent in light of the background information you have provided. Consider the following example:



The onset of the communicative paradigm in language teaching in the 1970s represented a significant departure from previous methods and approaches in that it positioned centre-stage the notions of language as communication, language in context, authenticity and appropriateness. Suddenly, competence in language was seen not merely as knowledge of the form of the target language but, more importantly, the ability to deploy that knowledge appropriately and fluently in the real world in order to 'get things done'. Form was now regarded as serving function, and knowledge how took precedence over knowledge that. Language learning curricula and syllabi were recast in order to reflect this new emphasis and the notional-functional syllabus was born – a syllabus which defined learning goals in terms of those things the learner could actually do with language.

This essay will discuss those factors responsible for the success of the communicative approach to language teaching since its inception over thirty-five years ago.

Explicit thesis statements

A thesis statement can be either explicit or implicit. An explicit statement is one where you state overtly what you intend to focus on in your essay. The ‘In this essay I will ...’ statement mentioned earlier is an example of an explicit thesis statement. Here are some other examples:

This essay takes a critical look at ...

This essay will consider whether ...

This essay seeks to shed light on the question of ...

In the following pages I will ...

The following pages outline/discuss/report on/consider the similarities and differences between ...

Implicit thesis statements

An implicit statement is one that makes clear the purpose of the essay without stating it overtly. Have a look at this example, which is an implicit alternative to the explicit thesis statement used in the above introduction on the emergence of the communicative paradigm:



The fact that the communicative approach to language teaching remains with us thirty-five years after its inception is reason to ask what it is about the approach that underlies its success.

You will see from this example that the writer never actually says they’re going to discuss the reasons for the success of the communicative approach to language teaching; however, it’s amply clear from the way in which the context has been created (‘the funnel effect’) what the discussion will focus on. In fact, if your introduction is well constructed, even before your reader has reached the thesis statement it may well be that they’re able to guess the main focus of your discussion. As they approach the tip of the funnel they should be predicting – hopefully accurately – what the essay will be about. As a writer, you need to ensure that such predictions are always accurate, and you do this by providing tramlines in the form of a skilfully developed contextual backdrop. In the above example, it’s interesting to note that even if the final sentence were omitted, the main focus of the essay would still be clear enough to the reader.

Occasionally, writers use questions to frame their implicit thesis statements. This is not a strategy you should use regularly, and of course not every introduction and/or essay topic lends itself to this kind of thesis statement. However, it can on occasion provide a useful alternative. Listed below are a few questions I’ve come across in students’ essays – some undergraduates’ and some postgraduates’:

- *Is this position really justified?*
- *Did structuralism and the audio-lingual methodology associated with it really deserve the criticism it received?*
- *Will the notion that non-native speaker varieties of English can constitute legitimate models of learning ever really acquire currency among the language-teaching community at large? And more to the point, would students themselves accept such models as acceptable targets of their learning?*
- *Given that language learners have always learnt languages with varying degrees of success, regardless – or in spite of – the teaching methodology used and the theories of language and learning underpinning it, the question perhaps needs to be asked, ‘Is it not perfectly reasonable to subscribe to an eclectic approach to language teaching?’*
- *This begs the question of whether transformational generative grammar has had any significant impact on foreign language pedagogy.*
- *In view of the often contradictory nature of its findings, to what extent should language teachers and materials designers allow SLA research to inform their activities?*
- *It is often claimed that native-like proficiency in a foreign language can only be achieved if learning begins prior to puberty. However, does the evidence really exist to support claims of a so-called ‘critical period’ in language learning?*

Now, although, you will not always want to use implicit thesis statements in your writing, they do make it easier to avoid the kind of less interesting, less sophisticated expressions of the ‘This essay looks at ...’ variety. Nevertheless, direct thesis statements placed early on in your introductions can also be more varied and may include expressions such as:

The following discussion sets out to ...

The discussion that follows analyses the question of ... and provides an account of why ...

..., and it is on the pros and cons of that approach that this essay will focus.

Finally, be careful about using words such as ‘attempts’ (*This essay attempts to ...*) as these can suggest that you’re not convinced you’ve succeeded in achieving your purpose. This does not inspire confidence in your reader!

TRY IT OUT!

#10

Look at this essay title:

‘Discuss the reasons why structuralism in language teaching was superseded by functionalism.’

Listed below are the main points to be included in an introduction to the above essay. Using this information to create a contextual backdrop for your upcoming discussion, write two versions of the introduction, one with the thesis statement at the start of the introduction and the other with it at the end. Think carefully about how your thesis statement will link the contextual information to the body of your essay, and how you can make it engaging for the reader.

- Historically, language-teaching methods and approaches have largely reflected developments in language-learning theory.
- As one learning paradigm goes out of favour and another replaces it, approaches to the teaching of language also change.
- Structuralism was critically undermined by Noam Chomsky, who replaced an empiricist theory of learning with a rationalist one.
- Cross-disciplinary insights into language and language use, emanating from philosophy, psychology, anthropology and sociology, also played a key role in fuelling the shift from a structural to a functional view of language.
- The functional view of language brought with it a change in what were regarded as the appropriate goals of language learning.
- Reinforcing these theoretical and pedagogical shifts in our understanding of language and language teaching were a series of significant social, political and technological developments that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s.

The middle ground

Finally, there is what might be termed a compromise strategy used in the presentation of a thesis statement. Here, an indication of the focus of the essay is given early on in the introduction, and confirmed at the end of the introduction via an explicit statement of intent. Look at these brief examples:



The idea that foreign languages are better learnt through doing – through actual communication – than through rote memorisation and the practice of grammar rules is not without its critics, many of whom point to their own success in learning foreign languages via such traditional methods. In fact, the evidence suggests that success in foreign language learning is possible irrespective of – or in spite of – the methodology employed, and likely has more to do with factors such as learners' first language, aptitude, motivation, personality and preferred learning style. In other words, despite a search for the holy grail of language teaching, there can, in fact, never be such a thing as an approach which is all things to all men – something which perhaps goes some considerable way to explaining the current popularity of eclecticism among language teaching professionals ...

With this in mind, in the pages that follow, criticisms commonly levelled at the learning-through-doing approach will be considered carefully with a view to establishing whether or not they are soundly based and a necessary part of language-learning classrooms.

In recent years, the debate over whether or not it is preferable for teachers of foreign languages to be native speakers of those languages has become increasingly polarised, with theoretical and anecdotal evidence being harnessed on both sides of the divide, in an effort to 'make the case' and 'win the argument'. As a consequence, the role of the non-native speaker teacher in the foreign language classroom is a regular feature of conference discussions and debates, journal articles and other fora, and it is an issue that simultaneously calls into question the increasingly common practice, by materials writers and publishers, of including non-native accents in listening materials. This essay casts a critical eye over arguments commonly presented for and against the use of non-native foreign-language teachers.

5.4 Indicating organisation and approach

As we saw in section 5.1, an introduction will often map out the route you're going to take in your discussion, specifying what will be covered and when. In other words, it will give the reader a brief preview of the organisational structure of your essay. This can be extremely useful as it makes it easier for the reader to understand your discussion and appreciate its relevance and significance, for they're better able to fit whatever they're reading at any particular moment into the broader picture or scheme you have given them at the outset, in your introduction. Generally speaking, this preview will immediately follow a thesis statement that is positioned at the end of the introduction. If the thesis statement appears early on in the introduction, the preview will probably still appear at the end, after the context has been established. Look at this example in which the preview follows a thesis statement (underlined):



The discussion that follows will look at four key pragmatic theories in terms of their contribution to our overall understanding of language and their implications for the way in which languages are taught. It will begin by briefly outlining Austin's Speech Act Theory (1962), Grice's Co-operative Principle, Lakoff's Politeness Principle, and Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory, before going on to consider their potential pedagogical relevance. The discussion will then focus on current language-teaching methods and materials with respect to the way in which they account for – or fail to account for – the realities of pragmatics in language use and their importance to the accurate expression and interpretation of meaning. Finally, consideration will be given to ways of incorporating into syllabus design those insights offered by the theories.

TRY IT OUT!

#11

Below is a brief list of the main items to be included in an essay entitled 'Explain and discuss Krashen's Monitor Model. Consider, in particular, the reasons for its prominence in the 1980s, the contribution it made to the language acquisition debate and to classroom pedagogy, and its ultimate failure to withstand scrutiny as a sound "theory"'. The items are listed in the order they'll appear in the essay. Write a short paragraph indicating the organisational structure of the essay.

- A brief overview of the theoretical context in which the model was proposed.
- A description of the Monitor Model in terms of what it sought to do and the five hypotheses of which it comprised:
 - the acquisition/learning hypothesis
 - the monitor hypothesis
 - the natural order hypothesis
 - the input hypothesis
 - the affective filter hypothesis.
- An explanation of how the theory informed language-teaching pedagogy, and in particular Krashen and Terrell's Natural Approach.
- A statement of why it attracted the attention of applied linguists and appealed so strongly to language teachers and materials developers.
- A detailed look at weaknesses inherent in the Monitor Model.
- An assessment of the lasting impact of the Monitor Model.

5.5 Length

One question I'm frequently asked is how long an introduction should be; what percentage of the entire essay it should account for. My first response (which students usually like because it's unambiguous and doesn't require too much pondering!) is to give a rule of thumb: 'The introduction should account for roughly 10 to 15 per cent of the entire essay.' My second response tends to be rather less welcome: 'an introduction should be as long as it needs to be' (which provokes considerably more head-scratching). Really, though, the second answer is the better one ... so what does it mean? Well, provided it fulfils its purpose, as described above, a paragraph can, in theory, be almost any length. In some cases it may need to be only a few lines, while in other cases it may require a page or more. However, you must always bear in mind the fact that the introduction is precisely that – a preface to the main discussion, and as such it would be odd were it to account for, say, 30 per cent of the entire essay. One way to keep the length

under control is to ensure you do not make the common mistake of discussing issues better dealt with in the body of the essay.

5.6 Paragraphing

Another common misunderstanding concerns how many paragraphs an introduction should contain. The idea many students seem to have that it should consist of only a single paragraph is simply mistaken. The rationale for beginning a new paragraph (see section 2.5) is as valid for introductions as it is for any other section of your essay. The chances are your introduction will contain two, three or more main ideas and will therefore warrant a series of paragraphs, not just one.

5.7 When is the best time to write an introduction?

Experienced writers often suggest that the best time to write an introduction is after you've completed the remainder of your essay, dissertation, etc. Why? Because that way you can ensure that it reflects accurately the order and content of what follows and in doing so better fulfils its purpose of preparing the reader for what is to come. Unless you have a clearly articulated plan and follow it in a highly disciplined fashion, it's all too easy for your essay to get derailed as you wander away from the topic. This can result in you reaching the end of your essay and finding that the beginning and the end do not match up neatly. As we'll see in section 7.6, the notion of 'matching up' is most clearly manifested in the relationship between the introduction and conclusion.

5.8 Handy language

Although there's an enormous variety of words and phrases that can appear in introductions, the box below contains a selection that may be of help to you as you shape your introductions. As you use alternative forms that don't appear in the box, add them to the bottom of the list and then use it for quick reference purposes.

Introductions: Handy language

This essay will consider whether ...

This essay casts a critical eye over ...

This essay will shed light on the question of ...

This essay will look at the reasons why ...

This essay will compare X with Y

..., and it is on the pros and cons of that approach that this essay will focus.

The following discussion (does x) ...
The following discussion takes a critical look at ...
The discussion that follows analyses the question of ... and attempts to ...
What follows is an analysis of ...
Those ideas will form the basis of the discussion below
Is this position really justified?
This begs the question of whether ...
Does the evidence really exist to support these claims?
This essay compares and contrasts ...
This essay presents ...
In the pages that follow, I (will) argue that ...
I will show/demonstrate, in the following pages, that ...
I will consider the evidence in support of ...
This essay will ... It will then go on to ... Finally, it will ...

Chapter 5 Key points checklist

An introduction should:

- contextualise the topic of your essay and your discussion of that topic. Context includes the historical, academic, conceptual and experiential backdrop of your discussion;
- give an indication of the direction or 'route' your discussion will take;
- stimulate interest and a sense of anticipation in your reader;
- contain a thesis statement, or 'statement of intent', which can appear anywhere in the introduction but typically appears at the beginning or the end. A thesis statement can be either explicit or implicit, with the latter often considered more sophisticated;
- follow the same paragraph rules as any other piece of text; i.e. it need not be restricted to one or two paragraphs;
- be as long as it needs to be, but not longer than a quarter of your essay, at most;
- be written once your entire essay has been completed so as to ensure it clearly reflects the final content of the essay.