Introductions & Conclusions in academic essays

This information will help you understand what's expected in introductions and conclusions in college-level writing: what effective intros & conclusions SHOULD do AND what they really should NOT do.

An introduction to introductions

An effective introduction is the reader's entry into the discussion of the essay. In most essays, the introduction leads up to and includes the thesis.

What is an essay introduction?	• **An effective introduction is the reader's entry into the discussion of the essay.** • **In most essays, the introduction leads up to and includes the thesis.** • When writing an introduction, consider: **what does the reader need to know in order to make sense of the focus and be prepared to read about it?**
How does an effective introduction work?	A good introduction • **raises the focused topic of the essay** • **orients the reader to the subject matter, and** • **provides context for the argument or explanation in the essay.** *What any particular introduction should include depends on the essay, but the information is shaped so that it directs the reader logically to the focus in the thesis.*
What should an introduction NOT do?	• **Most materials about introductions** tell you to "start by grabbing your reader by the throat" with a hook, and then give you a bunch of strategies or patterns to borrow from. **This is not very good advice for college essays.** • **The first sentence of an introduction does NOT** have to "grab the reader's attention." That's pretty daunting!. The job of the first sentence, and the whole introduction, is **to introduce the reader to the essay's focus.** • **The introduction should NOT rely on a random "strategy" like using a pithy quote or asking a question.** Instead, the first sentence should raise the topic and get right down to helping the reader know the context of the essay's focus.

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Some conclusions about conclusions

A conclusion "wraps up" or brings the discussion in an essay to a satisfying end–whatever that means! Conclusions are tricky–read the advice below for help.

What is an essay conclusion?	When you write a conclusion, **revisit and reiterate the key idea of the essay in light of the whole discussion–but avoid repeating (see below).**
How does an effective conclusion work?	Depending on the essay's focus the conclusion might • address opposing viewpoints • explain why readers should align with the essay's position • call for action or overview future research possibilities • present the focus idea in a more complex, sophisticated way that the reader will now understand, having read the whole essay.

What should a conclusion NOT do?	• **A conclusion should NOT simply "restate the thesis" and list the topic sentences.**
	  o *This is common but poor (or at least poorly worded) advice.*
	 • **It should NOT simply summarize the essay.**
	  o *A brief summary of the argument or discussion in a long essay–over ten pages–may be useful, but shorter essays don't need a restatement of the ideas.*
	 • **It should NOT name, list, or introduce the sources used in the essay**
	  o *(unless analysis of specific sources is the focus of the essay).*
	 • It should **NOT use phrases like "in conclusion," "to conclude," or "in summary."**
	  o *These are unnecessary and can irritate the reader–and the conclusion should be evident from how it's worded (and will be evident anyway, as it can be seen to be the end of the writing). If you tend to start conclusions this way, you can simply delete it when you edit.*

Think of it this way:

- When readers begin an essay, they don't know anything about its focus except what was revealed in the title; the job of the introduction is to set up that focus.
- **By the time readers are at the conclusion,** though, they have read through all the evidence and reasoning the writer presents. **At that point, they are able to understand more nuanced final commentary on the focus.**

Note: You may have learned to do "restating" and to use phrases like "In conclusion" in a speech communications class–that's because discussions and arguments when presented orally must meet different audience needs, including "reminders" of key ideas. Readers have the text to refer to, so they aren't needed.