

Writing an Introduction

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The Goals of an Introduction

A good philosophy introduction should achieve three basic things:

First, it should give the reader a sense of the general topic of the essay. This typically involves defining the core concepts of the discussion in a clear and illuminating way. You should also be sure to be brief here: you shouldn't go into detail about all the components of the view in question, but rather, only those that will feature in the discussion to follow.

Second, your introduction should inform your reader as to exactly where you stand on the issue—in other words, it should give a clear thesis statement. In philosophy, it's perfectly acceptable to say "In this paper, I will argue...". Make sure what follows is a claim that is at least somewhat controversial, and—this is important—is consistent with what you *in fact* argue in the essay.

And third, your introduction will provide your reader with a concise roadmap for how you plan on getting there. Don't go through each paragraph ("I then discuss this, and then this, ..."), but rather, the key moves to the argument. If you reject a specific premise of the argument for a specific reason, this is where you should let your reader know.

In addition, there are several things you should avoid doing in your introduction. First, avoid any sweeping language, or anything that is extremely obvious. (We all know that people have wondered for a long time about what is right or wrong.) You should also avoid introducing terms that are ambiguous or have specific meanings in the context of your essay without clueing your reader in as to what such words mean.

A Bad Introduction

"For centuries, philosophers have thought about pleasure. Pleasure is sometimes good, but is it always? Robert Nozick argues that we wouldn't enter the experience machine, because we don't just want pleasure. Everyone's pleasure is different, and we cannot say for sure whether or not people always want pleasure."

A Good Introduction

"Ethical hedonism is the view that pleasure is the only good. Robert Nozick argues against ethical hedonism by inviting us to consider whether or not we would choose a life plugged into a machine that provides us with the perfect amount and quality of pleasurable experiences for the duration of our lives. Nozick ultimately concludes that most of us would choose not to enter this Experience Machine, since most of us think there is more to a good life than pleasurable experiences. And as such, ethical hedonism is false. In this essay, I will argue that Nozick is correct in thinking that ethical hedonism is false, but that this conclusion does not follow from these premises. This is because the mere fact that we wouldn't plug in does not conclusively show that pleasure isn't the only good. Another possibility is that we mistakenly believe that there are other goods than pleasure, and these are what motivate us to forgo the machine."

What's bad about the bad introduction?

(1) *"For centuries, philosophers have thought about pleasure."*

This opening sentence is far too general to be useful. While it is a good idea to set-up the issue, it is better to do so in a way that helps us see the issue more clearly and specifically.

(2) *"Pleasure is sometimes good, but is it always?"*

It's probably best to avoid rhetorical questions like this—at a minimum, they should be used in place of a claim that the reader can otherwise infer from the previous discussion. (If you're unsure about how to use them, don't.)

(3) *"Robert Nozick argues that we wouldn't enter the experience machine, because we don't just want pleasure."*

You should assume that your reader doesn't know what the experience machine is, which means introducing it without explanation will be inevitably confusing. There is also a better way of articulating what the experience machine shows—namely, that there are other goods we want besides pleasure. While this is essentially what is meant by the second clause, it's better to be specific.

(4) *"Everyone's pleasure is different, and we cannot say for sure whether or not people always want pleasure."*

Even if this is true—it's beside the point within the context of the present discussion—it's not clear how this has anything to do with the experience machine example. If this were the claim the author is going to defend, then (1) it needs to be articulated in the form of a claim, such as by saying "In this essay, I will argue...", and (2) it's not at all clear how this makes contact with the experience machine example, so more set-up would be necessary.

What's good about the good introduction?

(1) *"Ethical hedonism is the view that pleasure is the only good."*

Starting with a definition of the view you're going to discuss, especially when the paper is quite short, is a good idea. Some brief setup might have been appropriate here (e.g., "It is widely agreed that pleasure is good and pain is bad", or something of this sort), but remember to avoid vague intros (see (1) in the previous section).

(2) *"Robert Nozick argues...ethical hedonism is false."*

These few lines do a nice job of briefly explaining the argument, without going into unnecessary details about features of the case that are irrelevant to the discussion to follow. Moreover, it explains the line of argument specifically enough for us to see what Nozick's core claim is.

(3) *"In this essay, I will argue that Nozick is correct in thinking that ethical hedonism is false, but that this conclusion does not follow from these premises."*

This is a nice and specific thesis claim. It explains both the valence of the argument (i.e., contra-Nozick), as well as the basic reason (i.e. conclusion doesn't follow).

(4) *"This is because..."*

The author does a nice job of briefly explaining *why* the conclusion doesn't follow. Of course, the rest of the essay will provide the argument; but here is where you want to give your reader a clear sense of how the argument is going to look.