Introductions

Introductions are the hardest thing to write, and the most important. I typically have a pretty firm sense of what grade a paper will receive by the time I finish the introduction.

In a 3-page paper, the introduction is typically the first paragraph. The reader expects the last sentence of that paragraph to be your claim. If it is not you must make very very explicitly clear what the claim is.

It is a very common experience to figure out what you are actually saying as you write. The process of putting ideas into words is often surprising—what you thought you could argue doesn’t really work on the page; other possibilities, connections, routes through the material present themselves. One good strategy is to vomit an intro onto the page in your first draft, and then go back and re-write when the paper is finished and you know what you are claiming and what order of material you have to present to back that claim up.

Good intros to 3 things:

1. They delineate, as narrowly as possible, what the paper will be about. There are an indefinite number of things you could write about almost any author or almost any text. What will the topic of this paper be?

2. Introductions make a claim. Another word for claim is thesis. A paper is not a book report. You should not summarize. You are making a point that you think is important. That point is your claim. It exists, not as an idea in your head, but as a sentence in black and white on the computer screen that you can point to. (Hopefully, you will point to the last sentence of the first paragraph.) For more information on what makes a good claim, please see the “Papers Gu8idelines” page.

3. Really good intros also give the reader a kind of roadmap to the paper—what steps will you take to demonstrate your claim? What order will they come in? That way your reader will know what to do with the info you are giving them. They will feel like they are driving with someone who is in full control. They will not wonder, Where are we going? You can do this explicitly (First, . . . . Second, . . . .) Really artful writers know that the order in which you bring up things in the intro builds an implicit expectation in your reader that this is the order you will follow in the body of the paper. But better to be explicit than confusing.