

Writing a basic introduction and conclusion

Reading (before class)

The purpose of a basic introduction to a philosophical paper is to furnish the reader with all of the materials necessary for understanding the central argument, and perhaps also the materials for understanding why the argument matters. For example, a basic introduction might concisely outline the philosophical issue at hand and then situate the thesis of the paper in a historical or dialectical context.

I offer you three rules of thumb for writing an introduction. First, keep it snappy! After writing an initial draft of the introduction, ruthlessly excise any material which does not contribute to explaining the philosophical issue, demonstrating its importance, or contextualizing your thesis. Second, avoid unsupported generalizations, especially those introduced by phrases such as “since the dawn of time” or “humankind has always wondered.” Third, make only those historical claims of whose accuracy you are certain. For example, do not say, “Kongzi was the first philosopher to develop a systematic understanding of the role of ritual in governance.”

Now consider this sample basic introduction built around the thesis, which I do not in fact endorse, that *the purpose of human existence is to pass on one’s DNA*:

What is the purpose of human existence? According to one classic view, endorsed by Kongzi,¹ human beings are essentially social creatures with the corresponding purpose of fulfilling certain communal roles. On an opposing view, however, human beings have a purpose set by a transcendent external source – by the Form of the Good according to Plato², or by the supreme deity Krishna according to the author of the *Bhagavad Gita*.³ In this paper, I reject both of these approaches in favor of a scientifically grounded answer. In particular, I will argue on the basis of the biological theory of natural selection that the purpose of human existence is to pass on one’s DNA. I will then show that since society and any possible transcendent external source are both independent from human biology, they cannot determine the purpose of human existence.

Let’s analyze this introduction carefully. I begin by introducing the central question:

What is the purpose of human existence?

The question does not require much explanation, so I do not waste time elaborating on it. I am especially carefully to avoid pontificating remarks like “Since the dawn of time, humankind has wondered about the purpose of existence.”

¹ Kongzi (2001). “The Analects.” In *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, trans. P. Ivanhoe and B. Van Norden (Indianapolis: Hackett).

² Plato. (2002). *Phaedo*. In *Five Dialogues*, trans. J. Cooper (Hackett: Indianapolis).

³ Anon. (1986/2004). *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. B. Miller (Bantam: New York).

To contextualize my thesis, I then briskly review some central answers to this question by other philosophers (of course citing my sources). I sketch only the broad outlines of their positions, reserving nuanced discussion for the body of the paper:

According to one classic view, endorsed by Kongzi,⁴ human beings are essentially social creatures with the corresponding purpose of fulfilling certain communal roles. On an opposing view, however, human beings have a purpose set by a transcendent external source – by the Form of the Good according to Plato⁵, or by the supreme deity Krishna according to the author of the *Bhagavad Gita*.⁶

I then situate my thesis relative to these historical views:

In this paper, I reject both of these approaches in favor of a scientifically grounded answer.

The remainder of the introduction covers familiar territory. I state my thesis and summarize my supporting evidence, signposting clearly in each case:

In particular, I will argue on the basis of the biological theory of natural selection that the purpose of human existence is to pass on one's DNA.

And finally I signpost that I will critically discuss the views of my opponents, and I outline the evidence that leads me to reject their views:

I will then show that since society and any possible transcendent external source are both independent from human biology, they cannot determine the purpose of human existence.

Now turn to the basic conclusion, which aims to review the central argumentative thread of the paper. Here you should briefly restate your thesis and evidence from a new angle, taking advantage of the fact that the reader has now seen your argument in full detail. As in your introduction, take care to avoid generalizations which you cannot support. Here is an example:

In short, I have argued that evolution plays the role which others have erroneously attributed to society or to transcendent external factors. Human beings owe nothing to society and were not created by any deity. Evolution, however, has shaped the human animal for the end of transmitting genes, an end which gives our lives the only purposes they will ever have.

Make sure not to thoughtlessly imitate this sample introduction and conclusion; especially do not repeat the exact phrases and sentence structures that you see here. Instead tailor your writing to the particular needs of your audience.

⁴ Kongzi (2001). "The Analects." In *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, trans. P. Ivanhoe and B. Van Norden (Indianapolis: Hackett).

⁵ Plato. (2002). *Phaedo*. In *Five Dialogues*, trans. J. Cooper (Hackett: Indianapolis).

⁶ Anon. (1986/2004). *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. B. Miller (Bantam: New York).

Practice (in seminar)

In your groups, build an introduction around the following thesis statement: “The self is neither a substance nor a process; in fact, it does not exist at all.”

Homework (after seminar)

Exercise 1. Revise the following sentence, correcting any errors of grammar and style: “But if the reason for why Buddhism is supposed to be gotten to is justified because the self does not exist, then isn’t it impossible because if someone doesn’t exist then he can’t be a Buddhist after all and that is a contradiction?”

Exercise 2. Write an introductory paragraph for your final paper. (Do not feel committed to this introduction. You may rewrite it entirely, and you may even change your paper topic if you wish.)