[This Handout Supports Goal 1]

An Introduction to Introductions

A successful introduction should accomplish three goals:

**Goal 1: Announce your topic; orient the reader to what’s coming**

Tell your readers everything they need to know in order to understand your thesis and initial argument. What narrow version of the assignment ended up becoming the particular focus of your paper? Was it a crucial link you discovered between your sources? Was it a connection between two key terms? Was it a particular problem, issue, or debate you culled from the readings and will be exploring in the paper?

**Goal 2: Introduce and connect the main sources you will be using**

Introduce the essays you’re writing about (providing the authors’ names and essay titles) and explaining how the essays relate to one another. Provide key terms and concepts that can be used later on to understand your argument. (Any concept or source that is not regularly returned to later in the essay should be saved for the body of your paper.) Your thesis will grow out of the backbone provided by these connections, so you are already leading to your thesis as you introduce these sources. What work has already been done by the authors you’re discussing? What does each one contribute to your topic? How does each one relate to the others?

**Goal 3: Include a statement of your thesis or theory**

Present the thesis that will be explored and supported in the rest of the paper, including any key connections you have developed between your sources and any contributions you have made to the topic in the process. How does your argument in the paper build on, add to, extend the claims made by your sources? (Thesis statements and development are discussed in more detail in an additional handout).

**Sample Introductions:**

**Orient the reader within the context of your chosen topic: What do they need to know?**

Notice how the following excerpt allows the reader to begin thinking about the topic of “class politics in America:”

- **131 student example:** Julie Charlip’s “A Real Class Act” is an autobiographical account of how the politics of class mold lifelong education and accomplishments. She brings scrutiny to the relationship of socioeconomics and opportunity, relating the two to how individuals further themselves academically. Complimenting Charlip’s essay, Barbara Mellix’s “From Outside, In” offers an added spin on the importance of education and class by examining language as it differs between cultures. While Mellix argues that ethnologies often do not mesh, she proposes that a communicative dichotomy is necessary in the transformation process one undertakes in academia. Dorothy Allison’s “This is Our World”
accompanies Mellix’s ideas about identity since both believe what is within us is extraordinary and should be expressed. These three authors each impart a unique perspective to the discussion of class politics in America because this contention is a delicate issue that hinges on how we learn and form understandings about ourselves, culture, and society. Establishing a nexus of scholastic merit is a time-honored means of betterment for Americans who move from one class to the next, but in practice, this precept is far-reaching in terms of how it fazes our identities and our sense of belonging.

- If introducing the essays, provide the author’s name and title of the essay. If you’re introducing more than one essay in your intro, briefly explain how the essays relate to one another (in particular, the sentences in italics):

  o 131 student example: In Victor Seidler’s article “Language and Masculinity, he argues that men use language to develop a separate identity; this identity is used to hide feelings and emotions that are primarily associated with females. He suggests that men won’t feel in control if they allow themselves to experience feelings and emotions openly. How do men develop a new language, Seidler’s article asks, if culture and community raise men to see detachments of feelings and emotions as normal? While Seidler’s article focuses mainly on identifying the behaviors associated with male superiority, Richard Rodriguez discusses a personal account that helped him to develop a new language. Rodriguez’s essay “Complexion” describes his personal struggle with having such dark skin. Rodriguez grew up feeling his complexion was something to be ashamed of because his family considered it a hindrance to achieving success. Like Seidler’s thoughts on male superiority, Rodriguez also views the language of male and female with certain distinctions. In Rodriguez’s family, the men seemed to be detached from their emotions[,] giving Rodriguez the belief that being emotionless is natural. Seidler’s and Rodriguez’s articles also relate to an article by Scott Russell Sanders. Sanders’ essay “The Men We Carry in Our Minds” provides another look at the differences of gender roles. As a child, Sanders recalls that men worked hard while the women stayed home. Sanders felt that women had a better life, but during his time in college, it was revealed to him that men had lived a life of less oppression. To Sanders this seemed ridiculous, but the ideas he held about men and women in his community were very different from those he met at college. While Seidler’s article helps explain why male superiority is so prevalent, Rodriguez and Sanders’ articles show the effects language can have on a male. Because a community can provide a distorted image of males and females it becomes important for males to develop languages of their own. By learning to identify with something outside their belief systems, such as educational experiences or meeting of various social classes, men can find
and form a language that fully benefits them as individuals. By attaining a new language, they are able to recognize the contradictions that their community-regulated languages have exerted on them.

- **Provide key terms and concepts that can be used later on to explain your argument:** Notice how the following introduction orients the reader to key terms such as *encoded* and *decode* in order to make the thesis easier to understand.

  - **130 student example:** Nowadays, because of the diversity in our world, the cultures in different countries or within different parts of the same country usually vary from one to the other. If people desire to adapt to a new environment, understanding the culture in that environment becomes very important. The ideas about understanding environments are illustrated in C. Carney Strange and James H. Banning’s essay “Educating by Design,” in which they write about how the physical features of a college campus can help participants to understand the environment. They state that the “functionality of the campus physical environment...communicates important nonverbal, symbolic messages” (700). They mean the designs and spaces of a campus physical environment usually have “encoded messages,” which are information that a builder of the campus environment wants to communicate. This “encoded” information is communicated in the form of “nonverbal messages”—messages that do not involve spoken words. Strange and Banning believe that participants in the environment will “decode,” that is, read and interpret, these messages based on their experiences within that environment. While Strange and Banning think physical environment can communicate “nonverbal messages,” verbal messages sometimes include “nonverbal” components and they can convey “nonverbal messages” as well. Moreover, since culture plays an important role in influencing people’s thinking and perceptions of the world, what seem to be verbal messages often carry “encoded nonverbal” cultural connotations. When people desire to adapt to a new environment that has a different culture than their own, they can easily feel confused and lost if they cannot correctly “decode” the “nonverbal messages” behind the verbal messages. Therefore, learning to interpret the “encoded nonverbal messages” behind the verbal messages helps people to adapt to the culture and also find their places within a new environment.

**Alternatives to the Traditional Introductory Paragraph:**

The sample paragraphs provided above demonstrate the classic opening moves expected in most college papers. However, a brief look through the collection of professional writers you have been reading will show that many writers vary those opening moves in order to gain their readers’ attention or to call attention to the particular organization of their essays. The moves they make can be profitably incorporated into a college paper as long as you fulfill your readers’ expectations about your thesis and the sources you will be using in subsequent paragraphs.

**Alternative Approach #1, the “hook”: Use the opening paragraph to get the reader’s attention**
Your paper is one of many that your instructor and classmates will read throughout the semester, so you want to make it memorable from the start. In this sense, the purpose of an introduction is similar to the job of a movie preview, highlighting the most interesting and innovative aspects of the paper in order to entice a reader to want to read more of what you’ve written. One way to do this is to start with a “hook” that draws your reader in right away and makes them want to read more. There are many different types of “hooks”:

- **A question.** See Maasik and Solomon, “Consuming Passions: The Culture of American Consumption”
  “If you were given a blank check to purchase anything—and everything—you wanted, what would you buy?” (65)

  “The Congregation for today’s service of the Journey, ‘a casual, contemporary, Christian church,’ fills the Promenade, a theater on upper Broadway in New York City … [T]he Journey’s laid-back pastor, Nelson Searcy, give[s] them the word. The word made film. Searcy, 32, who in jeans and a goatee looks like a way less Mephistophelian Charlie Sheen, is about to deliver the last of the church’s eight-part God on Film series. The topic? ‘Catwoman: Discovering My True Identity’ (427). (See also: Joan Kron, “The Semiotics of Home Décor”; Roland Marchand, “The Parable of the Democracy of Goods”; )

- **An arresting claim or interesting statistic** See Fred Davis, “Blue Jeans”
  “Since the dawn of fashion in the West some seven hundred years ago, probably no other article of clothing has in the course of its evolution more fully served as a vehicle for the expression of status ambivalence and ambiguities than blue jeans.”

- **A quote.** See Goewey, “Careful, You May Run Out of Planet: SUVs and the Exploitation of the American Myth”
  - W131 student example: 17th century philosopher Blaise Pascal once said, “Since we cannot know all that there is to be known about anything, we ought to know a little about everything.” Pascal seems to be pointing out the vastness of knowledge that exists in the world. There are numerous, if not infinite, informational tidbits in the world, from which we gather small parts as we live out our lives; Sven Birkerts makes similar observations in his essay, “The Owl Has Flown.” But at some point in the development of our society, Pascal’s principle was taken to an extreme; an ever-increasing majority of those around us seem to go about their lives believing that a complete knowledge of anything is impossible. On the other hand, there is a small sect of individuals who refuse to accept a world in which these assumptions are true; these are the artists of the world. While this plague of uncertainty sweeps over the planet, capturing all in its web of relativism, the artists stand firm in their belief of absolute Truth. Two such individuals are Dorothy Allison, author of “This Is Our World,” and Nancy Sommers, author of “I Stand Here Writing.” These women use
their art to awaken the world to their fundamental understanding of the universe as comprehensible and real. The tactics vary, and the styles vary more, but the goal of any true work of art is always the same: to rouse the world into awareness of Truth; not necessarily the details of Truth, but rather the idea that Truth could (and does) exist, and that it is our indispensable duty to seek it.

Notice how these essays don’t start off by saying “In this essay, I will discuss…” or “Since the beginning of time, people have wondered about…” That kind of a beginning sounds dull or familiar—like a paper that we’ve read many times before. Instead, they present us with something new, exciting, or different as a way of engaging our attention and making us want to find out more. If you choose this approach, use the following paragraphs to fill in any information regarding sources that your reader might need to know and include your thesis somewhere in the first two paragraphs.

**Alternative Approach #2: The Key Term Essay**

If your entire argument in the paper develops from a key term provided by one of the authors, it might make sense to focus the entire introductory paragraph on developing a working definition of that term, with one or two illuminating examples that help you demonstrate the complexities of the term while moving in the direction your thesis statement will take. Your thesis statement might be included in that opening paragraph or might appear in a follow-up paragraph, and your other sources might be introduced along the way as you add each one into the analysis.

**Activity: Revise a Weak Introduction.**

Read the following introduction as a class. What suggestions can you make for how to strengthen it, using some of the techniques described above?

In our culture today, many problems exist. Some problems are easily identifiable and easily solvable. Others, however, are more difficult to solve. Such problems include poverty, racism, disease, and war. Some have a tendency to label a problem, but they don’t seriously address the underlying issues and therefore, the problem continues to exist. A problem like this that comes out of our readings, is how to live in a sustainable way. Everyone has their own opinion about how we can live a more sustainable lifestyle.