

# On the Dissertation: How to Write the Introduction

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What makes a good introduction for a dissertation? Graduate students practice critiquing one another's thesis chapters, but they rarely read the introductions — usually because those are written to meet a defense deadline. Which is why when you need to write one, you can find yourself with neither experience nor models.

Above all, a dissertation introduction is a reverse-engineering project. You've finished all the chapters, so you know the goals of the work. Now it's time to take those goals and write the intro to fit them. This column is the first of an occasional series, "On the Dissertation," but the same advice will work for your first book, too, down the line.

Your aim here is to turn the reader into an interested consumer of your particular dissertation. You're looking to orient the audience and offer a concrete and confident sense of what's to come. So you should design your intro to welcome readers and shape their expectations of the chapters that follow.

Who are those readers? That question has a practical answer: Your first and most important readers are the members of your dissertation committee — the professors whose signatures will give you a doctorate.

Although your mother is not a specialist in your subfield, I suggest that you include her, too, in your implied audience, at least the one for the introduction. If you write with her (or your brother, or your best friend) in mind, your intro — and your whole dissertation, for that matter — will be the better for the clarity that you'll bring to the task of educating readers who are not experts in the subfield you've excavated for years.

What do your readers need from the intro? Not suspense, blind alleys, or a surprise ending. Save those for your novel. Instead, unfurl a preview of your thesis as a whole, and do so as lucidly and interestingly as you can. That means you should:

- Situate your work. What is the thesis of your thesis? In other words, what question are you trying to answer? And by answering it, which scholarly conversations are you entering? What difference are you making in those conversations? Why should the reader care? (That is, you need to answer the question: So what?)
- Give a preview of the research. Do so in terms both general and particular: Summarize your findings, and then break them down by category.

As you prepare to write, think about the introductions in scholarly books you consulted for your research. Remember how you would read the beginning section of the intro to understand the book's overall argument? Then you would come to the part where the author summarized each chapter. Remember how you would stop at that section, slow down, and carefully read it? Because it would tell you which parts of the whole book you'd need to read.

You need to do the same thing in your own introduction. Outline your main argument early on. Later, write a chunky paragraph on each chapter, or more if you deem it necessary. Is more necessary? Remember that you're reverse-engineering here. Think about the reader's needs and work backward from them. Maybe your first chapter needs more than a paragraph because it's where you lay out the big idea that structures the whole dissertation.

The introduction also needs to achieve some practical goals. It's where you:

- Explain your methodology. What tools — conceptual, interpretive, digital — have you used to do your work? How have you used them? Perhaps most important, why did you choose them?
- Define key terms. A term like "transnationalism" may be in regular use, but it's a broad label, and your readers may have their own understanding of it. You need to make clear what it means in your own work. You may fear that you'll sound like a simpleton if you define a term that's already out there. Or you may worry that you'll appear condescending to your specialist readers. (You may especially fear that such a move might irritate them, because they're more experienced than you are, so if anyone in the relationship has a right to condescend, it would be them). Not so. Readers want a meeting of minds with a writer. When readers understand how you're defining keywords,

they will turn the pages with comfort and anticipation, knowing that the writer is by their side.

And now some FAQs on the intro:

How long should it be? As Lincoln might have said, "long enough to reach the ground." In that probably apocryphal story, he was the rural sage responding to the question, "How long should a man's legs be?" In the case of your dissertation intro, a more relevant answer is, "as long as it needs to be." Still, I prefer Lincoln's formulation.

But to be less facetious: An intro is usually not as long as a chapter.

Should I include acknowledgments? Not in the introduction itself. It's best to put them in their own section. While we're on the subject, save any acknowledgments (and your dedication, if you're planning one) until you submit your approved final version of the dissertation. Your committee readers will feel it presumptuous if you include a passel of thank-you's at the front of a draft submitted for their approval, because releasing the verbal confetti makes it look as though you're taking their approval for granted.

How important is the introduction to my dissertation? Both very and not very. The introduction matters because it's the reader's first impression of your dissertation. But it matters less because it won't get as many eyes as the most important chapters of your thesis.

If you're planning to test the academic job market, the key parts of your dissertation are two chapters of your own choosing: the one that you adapt into your writing sample and, if the sample gets traction, the one you'll mine for your job talk. You should polish those two chapters to a sheen. The other chapters don't need as much buffing.

Your introduction won't get as many readers as those two chapters. Let that fact help you relax when you write it. In the end, remember that most readers of a dissertation will read only parts of it. It has often been said — by me, at least — that the number of people with whom you do not share DNA or a bed who will read your entire dissertation is ordinarily fewer than five.

When should I write my introduction? Both all along and at the very end. I start almost everything I write (including this essay) in the middle, at some point where I know what I want to say. As I write, I accumulate thoughts and ideas that might belong in an introduction, and gather them into a separate pile. For longer works, I create an "Introduction" folder and just dump those thoughts into it. I don't try to organize them. Then, at the end of the process, I return to that folder and mine it. It usually contains most of what I need, and with a little polish and a few additions, I finish at the beginning.

If I have an introduction, do I also need a conclusion? For a dissertation? Not necessarily. Books need a conclusion, and so do essays. (This paragraph is mine.) But dissertations are not books. They're part of your education, not just a demonstration of it, and they point toward your intellectual future. That said, you may want to write a conclusion, or an epilogue. But that's a subject for another day.

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He writes regularly about graduate education. His new book, *The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It*, is published by Harvard University Press. He welcomes comments, suggestions, and stories at [lcassuto@erols.com](mailto:lcassuto@erols.com). His Twitter handle is [@LCassuto](#).



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