

Introductions and Conclusions

The introduction and conclusion serve important roles in a history paper. They are not simply perfunctory additions in academic writing, but are critical to your task of making a persuasive argument.

A successful introduction will:

- draw your readers in
- culminate in a thesis statement that clearly states your argument
- orient your readers to the key facts they need to know in order to understand your thesis
- lay out a roadmap for the rest of your paper

A successful conclusion will:

- draw your paper together
- reiterate your argument clearly and forcefully
- leave your readers with a lasting impression of why your argument matters or what it brings to light

How to write an effective introduction:

Often students get slowed down in paper-writing because they are not sure how to write the introduction. Do not feel like you have to write your introduction first simply because it is the first section of your paper. You can always come back to it after you write the body of your essay. Whenever you approach your introduction, think of it as having three key parts:

1. The opening line
2. The middle “stage-setting” section
3. The thesis statement

To see how to navigate these three parts in practice, look at the below examples of a weak and strong introduction. Suppose you are taking a Near Eastern history class and your professor has distributed the following paper prompt:

“In a 4-5 page paper, describe the process of nation-building in one Middle Eastern state. What were the particular goals of nation-building? What kinds of strategies did the state employ? What were the results? Be specific in your analysis, and draw on at least one of the scholars of nationalism that we discussed in class.”

Here is an example of a **WEAK** introduction for this prompt:

“One of the most important tasks the leader of any country faces is how to build a united and strong nation. This has been especially true in the Middle East, where the country of Jordan offers one example of how states in the region approached nation-building. Founded after World War I by the British, Jordan has since been ruled by members of the Hashemite family. To help them face the difficult challenges of founding a new state, they employed various strategies of nation-building.”

Now, here is a **REVISED** version of that same introduction:

“Since 1921, when the British first created the mandate of Transjordan and installed Abdullah I as its emir, the Hashemite rulers have faced a dual task in nation-building. First, as foreigners to the region, the Hashemites had to establish their legitimacy as Jordan’s rightful leaders. Second, given the arbitrary boundaries of the new nation, the Hashemites had to establish the legitimacy of Jordan itself, binding together the people now called ‘Jordanians.’ To help them address both challenges, the Hashemite leaders crafted a particular narrative of history, what Anthony Smith calls a ‘nationalist mythology.’ By presenting themselves as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, as leaders of the Arab Revolt, and as the fathers of Jordan’s different tribal groups, they established the authority of their own regime and the authority of the new nation, creating one of the most stable states in the modern Middle East.”

The first draft of the introduction, while a good initial step, is not strong enough to set up a solid, argument-based paper. Here are the key issues:

1. Opening line: “One of the most important tasks the leader of any country faces is how to build a united and strong nation.”

- This first sentence is too general. From the beginning of your paper, you want to invite your reader into your specific topic, rather than make generalizations that could apply to any nation in any time or place. Students often run into the problem of writing general or vague opening lines, such as, “War has always been one of the greatest tragedies to befall society.” Or, “The Great Depression was one of the most important events in American history.” Avoid statements that are too sweeping or imprecise. Ask yourself if the sentence you have written can apply in any time or place or could apply to any event or person. If the answer is yes, then you need to make your opening line more specific.
- **Here is the revised opening line:** “Since 1921, when the British first created the mandate of Transjordan and installed Abdullah I as its emir, the Hashemite rulers have faced a dual task in nation-building.”
 - This is a stronger opening line because it speaks precisely to the topic at hand. The paper prompt is not asking you to talk about nation-building in general, but nation-building in one specific place.

2. Stage-setting: “This has been especially true in the Middle East, where the country of Jordan offers one example of how states in the region approached nation-building. Founded after World War I by the British, Jordan has since been ruled by members of the Hashemite family.”

- This stage-setting section is also too general. Certainly, such background information is critical for the reader to know, but notice that it simply restates much of the information already in the prompt. The question already asks you to pick one example, so your job is not simply to reiterate that information, but to explain what kind of example Jordan presents. You also need to tell your reader why the context you are providing matters.
- **Revised stage-setting:** “First, as foreigners to the region, the Hashemites had to establish their legitimacy as Jordan’s rightful leaders. Second, given the arbitrary

boundaries of the new nation, the Hashemites had to establish the legitimacy of Jordan itself, binding together the people now called ‘Jordanians.’ To help them address both challenges, the Hashemite rulers crafted a particular narrative of history, what Anthony Smith calls a ‘nationalist mythology.’”

- This stage-setting is stronger because it introduces the reader to the problem at hand. Instead of simply saying when and why Jordan was created, the author explains why the manner of Jordan’s creation posed particular challenges to nation-building. It also sets the writer up to address the questions in the prompt, getting at both the purposes of nation-building in Jordan and referencing the scholar of nationalism s/he will be drawing on from class: Anthony Smith.

3. Thesis statement: “To help them face the difficult challenges of founding a new state, they employed various strategies of nation-building.”

- This thesis statement restates the prompt rather than answers the question. You need to be specific about what strategies of nation-building Jordan’s leaders used. You also need to assess those strategies, so that you can answer the part of the prompt that asks about the results of nation-building. (See our guide to writing thesis statements here [link]).
- **Revised thesis statement:** “By presenting themselves as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, as leaders of the Arab Revolt, and as the fathers of Jordan’s different tribal groups, they established the authority of their regime and the authority of the new nation, creating one of the most stable states in the modern Middle East.”
 - This thesis statement is stronger because:
 - 1. It directly answers the question in the prompt. Even though you will be persuading readers of your argument through the evidence you present in the body of your paper, you want to tell them at the outset exactly what you are arguing.
 - 2. It discusses the significance of the argument, saying that Jordan created an especially stable state. This helps you answer the question about the results of Jordan’s nation-building project.
 - 3. It offers a roadmap for the rest of the paper. The writer knows how to proceed and the reader knows what to expect. The body of the paper will discuss the Hashemite claims “as descendants from the Prophet Muhammad, as leaders of the Arab Revolt, and as the fathers of Jordan’s different tribal groups.”

If you write your introduction first, be sure to revisit it after you have written your entire essay. Because your paper will evolve as you write, you need to go back and make sure that the introduction still sets up your argument and still fits your organizational structure.

How to write an effective conclusion:

Your conclusion serves two main purposes. First, it reiterates your argument in different language than you used in the thesis and body of your paper. Second, it tells your reader why your argument matters. In your conclusion, you want to take a step back and consider briefly the historical implications or significance of your topic. You will not be introducing new

information that requires lengthy analysis, but you will be telling your readers what your paper helps bring to light. Perhaps you can connect your paper to a larger theme you have discussed in class, or perhaps you want to pose a new sort of question that your paper elicits. There is no right or wrong “answer” to this part of the conclusion: you are now the “expert” on your topic, and this is your chance to leave your reader with a lasting impression based on what you have learned.

Here is an example of an effective conclusion for the same essay prompt:

“To speak of the nationalist mythology the Hashemites created, however, is not to say that it has gone uncontested. In the 1950s, the Jordanian National Movement unleashed fierce internal opposition to Hashemite rule, crafting an alternative narrative of history in which the Hashemites were mere puppets to Western powers. Various tribes have also reasserted their role in the region’s past, refusing to play the part of “sons” to Hashemite “fathers.” For the Hashemites, maintaining their mythology depends on the same dialectical process that John R. Gillis identified in his investigation of commemorations: a process of both remembering and forgetting. Their myth remembers their descent from the Prophet, their leadership of the Arab Revolt, and the tribes’ shared Arab and Islamic heritage. It forgets, however, the many different histories that Jordanians champion, histories that the Hashemite mythology has never been able to fully reconcile.”

This is an effective conclusion because it moves from the specific argument addressed in the body of the paper to the question of why that argument matters. The writer rephrases the argument by saying, “Their myth remembers their descent from the Prophet, their leadership of the Arab Revolt, and the tribes’ shared Arab and Islamic heritage.” Then, the writer reflects briefly on the larger implications of the argument, showing how Jordan’s nationalist mythology depended on the suppression of other narratives.

Introduction and Conclusion checklist

When revising your introduction and conclusion, check them against the following guidelines:

Does my introduction:

1. draw my readers in?
2. culminate in a thesis statement that clearly states my argument?
3. orient my readers to the key facts they need to know in order to understand my thesis?
4. lay out a roadmap for the rest of my paper?

Does my conclusion:

1. draw my paper together?
2. reiterate my argument clearly and forcefully?
3. leave my readers with a lasting impression of why my argument matters or what it brings to light?