

Overview: Writing from the Inside Out

When someone asks for directions to get somewhere, it's easier to provide him or her with a detailed map if you've actually made the trip yourself. You are able to quickly determine the important landmarks or road signs to watch for, and can get that person to his or her destination as quickly as possible with minimal distractions. But if you've never been there yourself, all you can offer is a general idea of where to go, without really giving the kind of key information your traveler needs to be confident about the route.

The same is true for writing. When students try to write an essay by first focusing on the introduction, it's like trying to draw a map to a place they've never been. Yet that is what is asked of students all the time. They are expected to start with an introduction that describes their topic and then come up with a thesis—their opinion about the topic—including three or more reasons why they feel that way. Then they are to write their body paragraphs to support their thesis. This seems so backward! Imagine trying to give a route to a place you've never been!

Ideas don't occur in ready-made order. Students need to experience the stages of the writing process in which they brainstorm, put their ideas down, and then start to sort and organize them into some kind of order that makes sense. They could sort their ideas from most important to least important, or they could follow a sequential order. They could be writing to solve a problem, in which case they would want to explain the problem first and then offer several good solutions. In this case, they might want to save their best solution for last. Perhaps they are arguing for or against something. In this case, they would want to offer counterarguments along the way.

When students follow the steps of the writing process, they find that they are really writing from the inside out. They are putting their strongest ideas down on paper, then using strategies and tools to organize and sort those ideas. Then, they can get feedback from others (peers or teachers) and revise their ideas, their organization, and even specific word choices. They may need to find more evidence to support their ideas, which may in turn influence their organization.

After students have spent some time manipulating their words and have settled on a structure, then they will be ready to make their road map.

The introduction serves to tell the reader what he or she is about to encounter. It starts with a hook that engages the reader and then follows up with a description of what the reader can expect to find in the text. Then, the introduction outlines the format and the key points of interest, so the reader knows what to look for and anticipates these transitions as he or she is reading.

If the student has already determined the structure and the key points, then writing the introduction is easy. The student only has to use his or her own paper as the reference document. But without this reference, the student is making it up and hoping the ideas that follow will actually match the introduction.

Start students out by determining how to distinguish relevant from unimportant details in a text. Once they know how to offer strong support for a main idea, they'll be on their way to creating an organized paper. Then, have students go back and write their introduction. Finally, have them write a closing that mirrors the introduction and sums up the journey that the reader took. The closing is almost like a memory book, offering souvenirs and mementos from the trip and reaffirming everything that was presented in the introduction.

You may have heard of this process before, described in this way:

- “Tell them what you’re going to tell them.”
- “Tell them.”
- “Tell them what you told them.”

Students may think this approach is a little strange at first, but ultimately, it takes a lot of pressure off. They find that it is easier to throw out all kinds of ideas and then winnow down to only their best thoughts. Then, when students write their introductions, they aren’t overwhelmed by the prospect of what to write or how to start.

This section provides a Mini-Lesson for identifying and writing main ideas and details. Then, it introduces topic and concluding sentences as a way to provide structure to a paragraph. The last lesson gives students a chance to practice doing research so they understand the importance of using primary and secondary sources when doing research.