

Academic Writing: Introductions – An Exercise

Here are three introductory paragraphs of an essay that is written in reply to a set question. Consider the questions after each example and, if you like, check against our answers at the end.

Example 1

Essay Question: **How does Dorothy Canfield Fisher's novel *The Home-maker* examine gender roles of the 1920s?**

When one thinks about women writers, the same usual suspects come to mind: Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Margaret Atwood, Alice Walker. There is a lot of scholarship about women writers, most of which has been carried out in the last 30 years or so. Before that, women writers were considered very much the exception to the rule. There was a lot of pressure on women to be mothers and wives rather than writers. However, some women chose to defy the odds. Novelists such as Henry James's friend Edith Wharton wrote best-sellers in the late 19th century. Wharton is now recognised as a classic writer, not even just a woman writer. One author who still does not have very much recognition is the American writer Dorothy Canfield Fisher.

Q1: Does this introduction give you a good idea of how the writer understands the question?

Q2: Does it give you a good idea of what the writer's argument is going to be? (i.e., how they are going to answer the question)

Q3: Does it outline some of the main issues that the essay is going to discuss in answering the question?

Q4: Do you feel you have a good idea of what will come next?

Example 2

Essay Question: **How does Dorothy Canfield Fisher's novel *The Home-maker* examine gender roles of the 1920s?**

Most people will not have heard of the American writer Dorothy Canfield Fisher (1879-1958). According to the Encyclopedia Britannica Online, she was awarded a Ph.D in Romance Languages in 1904.¹ This in itself reveals how unusual she was. She wrote a number of very successful novels: *The Squirrel-Cage* (1912), *The Bent Twig* (1915), *The Brimming Cup* (1921), *The Home-maker* (1924), *Her Son's Wife* (1926), and *The Deepening Stream* (1930), to name just the most popular. She also wrote children's stories, and a number of educational texts. She was particularly interested in the Montessori movement. Her child-rearing manual, *Self-Reliance* (1916), demonstrates this influence.² Not only was she interested in children, she was interested in how the entire family functioned. Several of her novels look at the various roles of the father, the mother, and the children in the family at the time. One novel that is particularly effective in questioning the roles society has decreed for men and women is *The Home-maker*, published in 1924.

¹See <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/680366/Dorothy-Canfield-Fisher> (25 May 2010).

²Jennifer Parchesky, "The Business of Living and the Labor of Love: Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Feminism, and Middle Class Redemption," *Colby Quarterly*, vol. 36, issue 1 (2000), p. 32.

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Q4: Do you feel you have a good idea of what will come next?

Q5: Do you feel this introduction is better than the previous example?

Example 3

Essay Question: **How does Dorothy Canfield Fisher's novel *The Home-maker* examine gender roles of the 1920s?**

The Home-maker (1924) was one of Dorothy Canfield Fisher's many novels. In her time she was an extremely successful American writer, although now few would recognise her name. Unlike her other novels, *The Home-maker* is still in publication, having been reprinted by Persephone Books in 1999. According to Persephone Books' website, it is "one of the Persephone Books that has most been enjoyed by reading groups".¹ One of the reasons for its modern popularity is the novel's examination of prescribed gender roles of the early 20th century. The entire plot hinges around what happens to an average American family when the mother, Evangeline, must go out to work when her husband is injured. Both Evangeline and her husband Lester must step into the other's gender role. As we shall see, the novel asks the reader to consider whether perhaps a mother might be happier and more effective working outside the home. It also, perhaps more daringly for its time, implicitly shows that the father might be a very good "home-maker". This essay will look at how *The Home-maker* succeeds in demonstrating that prescribed gender roles do not always work for the best. This will be done through analyses of Evangeline's own transformation, Lester's journey and in particular their changing relationships to their children.

¹See: <http://www.persephonebooks.co.uk/pages/titles/index.asp?id=25> (26 May 2010).

Q1: Does this introduction give you a good idea of how the writer understands the question?

Q2: Does it give you a good idea of what the writer's argument is going to be? (i.e., how they are going to answer the question)

Q3: Does it outline some of the main issues that the essay is going to discuss in answering the question?

Q4: Do you feel you have a good idea of what will come next?

Q5: Do you feel this introduction is better than the previous example?

Our answers:

Example 1

Q1. No. The introduction tells the reader something about how the student views the general topic of women writers.

Q2. No. It only comes to the name of the author in question in the very last sentence. The reader might be forgiven for thinking the essay was going to be about Edith Wharton.

Q3. No.

Q4. Not really – this could go in a lot of different directions!

This is what one might call a “history of the world” introduction. Keep in mind that your reader/marker probably already knows something about the topic, given that he or she set the question. What the reader/marker doesn’t know is how you, the writer/student, are going to answer the question. Don’t leave your reader none the wiser as to what lies ahead in the essay. You don’t need to give the whole game away, but an academic essay is not a mystery novel.

Example 2

Q1. It does give one a bit of an idea of how the writer/student understands the question, because in the last sentence, he or she has written that the *Home-maker* is “particularly effective in questioning the roles society has decreed for men and women”. Reading between the lines, the reader/marker can tell that the writer/student believes the novel questions gender roles, and does so effectively. However, the reader should not have to read between the lines!

Q2 & 3. The introduction doesn’t identify the writer’s argument, nor does it outline main issues that will be discussed in answering the question. The introduction is rather confusing, as it touches on a number of things – Fisher’s Ph.D, the titles of her novels, the fact that she wrote children’s stories and educational texts – that do not seem to be relevant to the essay question. The reader/marker is probably left wondering whether the writer/student is going to use any of these seemingly unrelated issues in the argument to come.

Q4. I think at least we would expect a narrowing of focus to follow, i.e. more specifically about the novel in question. If the writer went on to explain how he/she was going to tackle the question, then he or she could go back and cut out a lot of the extraneous information here, and make a more effective introduction.

Q5. Possibly insofar as it does mostly discuss Dorothy Canfield Fisher. However, it doesn’t discuss the novel in particular until right at the end. There is a lot of background information that the reader may well not know what to do with (and one does not want a confused reader!). This might be a good redrafting of Exercise 1, but it still needs a more work.

Example 3

Q1. Yes, because the writer has specified that the novel challenges gender roles of the 1920s – not of contemporary society – and because this introduction lets us know a bit about how the novel does this.

Q2. Yes. The writer is going to argue that the novel is successful in suggesting that some women may be happier working than being “home-makers” and that conversely, some men may be happier staying at home and raising children.

Q3. Yes: the essay will address the issue of “prescribed gender roles”. It will analyse Evangeline’s transformation, Lester’s journey and their changing relationships to their children.

Q4: Yes, the reader has a roadmap for the main body of the essay to follow.

Q5: Yes.