

INTRODUCTIONS

Clarity | Nuts + Bolts

Craig Smith

Craig // Hey, thanks for joining us today on Clarity, a podcast all about helping you communicate God's truth with clarity and power. I'm Craig Smith, the host around here and I am so honored that you would join us for another one of our bonus pre-launch episodes where we talk about the nuts and bolts of preparing great messages.

Today we're going to be talking about introductions, which are way more important than most people give them credit for. In fact, I would say that the quality of an introduction can actually make or break a talk.

The quality of an introduction can actually make or break a talk...because your introduction gives momentum to the talk. But, here's the thing: momentum can be either positive or negative.

You might be able to overcome the negative momentum of a bad introduction, but how much more impact will your message have if your introduction actually hits the accelerator and catapults your audience into the content?

That's what we're looking for in an introduction.

I've never heard what I would call a great talk that didn't begin with a great introduction. I've heard some good talks that had relatively weak introductions, but no great ones. Great talks make the most of every part of the message, starting with the introduction.

Now, at this point, I've hopefully accomplished the two things that every great introduction does:

1. The first thing a great introduction does is **orient your audience to the topic** – it helps them understand what we're talking about today. So what are we talking about today? We're talking about introductions. I've oriented you to that topic.
2. The second thing a great introduction does is **stir up interest in the topic** – it gets people interested in your content. I've told you that the quality of your introduction has a direct and substantial impact on the quality of your whole message. So now you're thinking "is that true?" "Are my introductions helping or hurting my messages?" "How do I know?" "How do I write better introductions?" You're probably interested in finding out at least a little more about introductions.

That's the two things that great introductions accomplish. They **orient your audience to the topic** and they **stir up interest in the topic**. Another way to think about it is that a great introduction tells your audience where you're going and convinces them to come along for the ride. Now let me nuance this just a little, because this is important: when I say "tell your audience where you're going," I don't mean give away the punchline. The introduction shouldn't give the big idea or the main take-away of your message right up front. That's almost always a mistake. You want them to wonder, you want them to want to hear what you have to say. If you tell them what you're going to say right up front, there's no real eagerness to listen.

Academic papers usually have something called an abstract printed right up front. An abstract is, basically, a hyper-condensed version of the whole article. It kind of says "here's my point, just without all the supporting evidence that got me there or the discussion about what this means going forward."

That works in academic settings but, in general, that's a terrible way to start a message. It tells your audience where you're headed, but it doesn't do much to convince them to come along for the ride. In fact, it might cause some people to tune out because they think "oh, I already know that, so what's the point of paying attention here?" or they might think "I totally disagree with that, so why should I even listen to you?"

By the way, in technical terms, what I'm saying here is that your message should be **inductive** instead of **deductive**. We'll tackle this in a little more detail in another one of these Nuts + Bolts podcasts. For now, just understand that deductive messages start with the main idea and then develop, prove and apply that main idea throughout the talk. Inductive messages give the audience puzzle pieces along the way and then help them put it all together into the main idea at the end.

I strongly believe that inductive messages are more effective in our current cultural context. Check out that Nuts + Bolts bonus podcast and I'll explain exactly why.

Ok, so how do you write a good introduction? It's really not that complicated. Let me give you three practical keys:

1. First, **write the introduction last**. Let me say that again: write the introduction last. Until you've gotten a really clear idea of where the message lands, you can't write a great introduction. You can't tell someone where you're going until you know exactly where you're going.

2. Second, **get your audience to ask themselves the question that your message answers**. Once you have the message developed, ask yourself "what need does this message address?" What need does this message address? One of the things that I find extraordinarily helpful in writing introductions is to take the big idea of my message and ask "what question is this an answer to?" Then I try to write an introduction that gets the audience to ask themselves that question. The more you can get your audience wondering what the answer to that question is, the more you will have them interested in what you have to say. And remember the two things we're looking to accomplish with our introductions? **Tell your audience where we're headed** and **convince them to come along for the ride**. To **orient them to the topic** and **stir up interest in the topic**. If your audience is asking themselves the question that your message is going to answer, then they'll want to hear what you have to say...and they'll experience this tremendous sense of satisfaction - closure even - when they get that answer in the form of your big idea.

Ok, so how do you do this? How do you get your audience to ask themselves the question that your message answers? I call this **creative backtracking**...working backwards from the big idea to a creative place where you can easily collect the most people to take the trip with you.

For instance, this week at my church, I'm preaching on Psalm 84...and the big idea of Psalm 84 is that Nothing is better than the presence of God. That's where we're headed. So what I want my audience to be asking is "what's the best thing I could ever receive?" So maybe my introduction just asks them "hey, let's have a little fun. Let's say you were on your way home today and you stopped by a garage sale and, on a whim, bought an old Aladdin-style lamp. And when you got home you thought, hey wouldn't it be funny if I rubbed this lamp and an actual genie popped out? So just for fun, you rubbed the lamp and an actual genie did pop out? But instead of three wishes, he gave you one wish and said, you've got five seconds: what's it gonna be? What would you wish for? Go ahead and do it right now!

Chances are that a lot of you would wish for things related to finances or careers or relationships. Maybe some of you would wish for healing or health.

But what if I told you that most of those big, pie-in-the-sky were a waste of your wish? What if I told you that most of those things are a distraction from something much better, much more valuable...that you could be wishing for. And what if I told you that this one, way-better thing, isn't just something that you can wish for...it's something you can actually have...today.

Why don't you grab a Bible and make your way to Psalm 84.

That's creative backtracking. There are lots of different options, but the goal is always the same: to **get your audience to ask themselves the question your message answers**.

3. Ok, just one more practical step to writing a great introduction: **Keep it brief**. In general, if your introduction takes more than 3 minutes to get through, people start thinking "ok, just get to it already!" That's not what you want anyone thinking at the beginning of the message...because chances are if they're thinking that at the beginning of your message, they're not going to stick with you mentally to the end. So keep it brief. I shoot for under three minutes.

Ok, let's review:

A great introduction does two things:

- it orients your audience to the topic
- it stirs up interest in the topic.

It tells your audience where you're headed and it convinces them to come along for the ride.

And the three keys to writing a great introduction are:

1. Write the introduction last. You can't tell your audience where you're headed until you know exactly where you're headed.
2. Figure out how to get your audience to ask themselves the question that your message answers. Use creative backtracking.
3. Keep it brief.

Hey, thanks for tuning in today. I really hope this has given you some practical tools to help you communicate God's truth with clarity and power. If this has been helpful to you, I would consider it a huge encouragement if you would like and review this podcast because that really helps us get the word out to others about this resource. Also, I'd encourage you to subscribe to make sure that you don't miss any of our upcoming podcasts that will be released soon. See you next time.