

# Intro guidelines

Intros must hook the reader's attention and make them want to read on. Here are a few pointers to help you make people read what you have written.

## Intros should be kept short and non-convoluted

### Good

So, you've got your telescope, a thermos of coffee and an adoring partner to gaze with. You might like to add to that list a laptop with *KStars* installed – *KStars* oozes functionality and is the perfect companion for a night's star spotting.

This takes a lot of effort to understand. Each 'But' is like a change in direction, so it's hard to understand just what he means. It's also too long: aim for about 40–50 words. 

### Bad

Celestia is like a draught of magic star-potion that gives you super-hero powers to help you travel through space and time. Rather than nail your feet to the earth, virtually speaking, *Celestia* releases these shackles and enables you to explore the universe from any location and move from one to another as if you had an infinite improbability drive, only without the improbability. And even if you resist the temptation to skip through the constellations like the captain of the *Heart of Gold*, *Celestia* is also perfectly capable of showing you which constellations will be visible from your garden this evening.

### Awful

Technology was once likened to a train. If you were not on the train, you were destined to become part of the track. **But** if you were on the train, it didn't matter if you were in first or standard class, everyone on board moved with the times. **But** the nature of technology has changed since the passing of the personal computer revolution. Manufacturers have to work harder to sell us the benefits of their innovations.

## Intros should be vivid, not vague

### Good

You might have an Athlon FX-60, 4GB of RAM, 1,000GB of hard disk space and the perfect Linux setup installed, but one error in a system update and your über-powerful machine could grind to a halt. A broken config file, a buggy *Glibc* or a missing kernel module can leave your system unbootable and you reaching for a backup.

This could have said: "You could have the bestest, fastest machine in the world, but one error..." but by describing this dream system, the writer has made it seem more immediate. 

### Bad

The world wide web is heading into adolescence and there are big changes on the horizon that will change the way we use it. Though the technology that underpins the whole edifice has evolved to provide faster speeds, more reliable connections and better ways of finding information, the same can't be said at the user end.

This tutorial starts with clichés, which hide what he's trying to say. Adolescence, changes on the horizon and underpinned edifices are too vague to be interesting. 

## Be careful with subordinate clauses

A subordinate clause forces readers to double back on themselves, which doesn't help when the aim is to hook them into the text. Look how far the reader has to read before they find out what the subject of the sentence is.

After trailblazing new features for so long, it seems that for this release of the 3D graphics suite (a simultaneous release with the Windows version) **THE MAYA DEVELOPMENT** team have stepped back and spent time looking at the details of how systems such as text rendering and polygon primitives work.

Too much detail slows readers down, resisting their efforts to get into the text. Make it easier for them, and **REMOVE UNNECESSARY DETAIL**. The information about the Windows release should have gone in later in the text.

## Start with something interesting!

### Good

Many good things have come from Illinois. Chicago blues. Abraham Lincoln. *The Simpsons*. But to us geeks, one of the best, perhaps even better than Raquel Welch, is the mighty *Apache* webserver, via Rob McCool and the National Center for Supercomputing Applications, Urbana.

Nobody is going to be hooked in by the idea of something being 'very popular' or 'the quietest BSD project'. *Apache*, on the other hand, is better than the *Simpsons*, the blues and Rachel Welch! 

### Bad

NetBSD is the quietest project from the BSD stable of operating systems. While FreeBSD races along as a reliable PC workstation and server OS, and OpenBSD's superb security track record continues, the NetBSD Foundation plods on in the background with new releases and support for ever more hardware.

### Awful

Linux systems that run directly from the CD are very popular. These live distributions not only help attract new users to the world of Linux but are useful if you need to repair a broken system.

- Don't exaggerate – the reader will feel cheated.
- Keep it short.
- Keep it to the point.

- Avoid:
- Official bodies.
  - Negatives.
  - Excessive punctuation (slows readers down).

# Types of intro

If you are struggling for inspiration about how to start your piece, consider using one of these intro styles...

## Question leads

### Good

Knock your notebook off the table, and what usually happens? You can take an educated guess. After all, most of us wouldn't want to put it to the stump. Even here at [magazine], where we ruthlessly and rigorously stress equipment, the idea of a laptop 'drop test' is anathema.

### Beware...

Been playing with *Bryce 4* over the last couple of months? You can't have failed to notice that it also supports animation features.

Be careful with questions. A closed question, like the one above, can be answered yes or no without the reader having to think about the answer: it's not engaging. It might work if the reader *has* been playing with *Bryce 4*, but not otherwise. The question on the left conjures an image; something to make the reader think. It also contains the promise that if they keep reading, they'll find out what *does* happen.

## Quotation leads

### Good

"GNU, which stands for GNU's not Unix, is the name for the complete Unix-compatible software system I'm writing so that I can give it away free to everyone who can use it."  
And so begins the GNU Manifesto, written by Richard Stallman to ask for help and support at the beginning of the project.

### Also good

"Alkaline Trio saved my life" says Anna, a kohl-eyed 23-year-old from Glasgow who shares sticks of red licorice with us as we sit side-by-side on the steps of the London Astoria.



If you're going to introduce your work with a quotation, use one that makes sense on its own (rather than one that makes sense only in the context of the feature/review/whatever). The quote from Stallman relies on prior knowledge, so it bends this rule, but it's safe to assume that *LXF* readers are familiar with it.

## The intro with a twist AKA the delayed drop

### Good

Everyone loses some data at some point: a picture, document, address or vital soundfile. It's a fact of computer life that most people have come to accept – wrongly.

By confounding the readers' expectations, the writer has generated interest in what they are about to say. They come across as knowledgeable, about to reveal secrets that the reader cannot live without, so making them read on.

### Also good

Most people think the internet is there to be consumed. Most people spend more time browsing websites than making them. Most people don't realise they can set up their own BitTorrents that are just as useful as everyone else's. But you're not most people, are you? We needn't remind you of all people that your Linux computer contains some of the most powerful and most popular server software ever created.

## The historical intro

### Good

In the early days of 3D software, the tools weren't so complex as they are now – mainly because they weren't half as powerful as today's 3D tools.

Don't dwell on how things were; you're only using the past to highlight some aspect of the present – in this case, how powerful 3D software is.



### Bad

Technology was once likened to a train. If you were not on the train, you were destined to become part of the track. **But** if you were on the train, it didn't matter if you were in first or standard class, everyone on board moved with the times. **But** the nature of technology has changed since the passing of the personal computer revolution. Manufacturers have to work harder to sell us the benefits of their innovations.

## Anecdotal/Scene setting

### Good

The Earth is at war. The Strogg, cybernetic killing machines that require body parts from living beings to expand their empire, have laid siege to the planet.

If you're writing about something that most people find difficult to get their heads round, try personalising it. Internet privacy isn't the easiest subject to understand, so an example from the real world is the best way to grab the reader's attention.

### Also good

When Kathryn Hanson of Oakland, California, saw a story with the phrase "rent boy" she wanted to find out what it meant, so she searched for it on Google. Now, the US government's effort to obtain data on internet activity while invoking the fight against terrorism and the prosecution of online crime has made her and others hesitant about the information they type into a search engine.