

Writing an Honors Preface

What is a Preface?

Prefatory matter to books generally includes forewords, prefaces, introductions, acknowledgments, and dedications (as well as reference information such as title pages, tables of contents, etc.). A foreword is a short introduction to the book and author, often written by someone other than the author.

Introductions are flexible and varied in purpose; usually they open the formal discussion of the subject of the book, placing it in context or providing background information. Acknowledgments mention and thank those who helped with the work; they are sometimes in a separate section after the preface, but are also commonly incorporated at the end of the preface.

The preface is a place where the author can speak directly to the reader (in the first person) about the choices made in the project. The author does not primarily consider the topic of the book so much as the kind of work he or she has done, and is describing the procedures. That is why a new preface is written for each new edition of a work. The length is usually fairly short (about 3-8 typeset pages, or 5-12 manuscript pages).

The material found in professional published prefaces falls into two categories: 1) material relating to the main topic and the author's intellectual position, and 2) rationales for the rhetorical choices made in the work (audience, terminology, format, etc.).

In the first category, prefaces clarify the main point of the work and explain the choice of topic. It may have emerged as a response to theoretical discussions or problems in a discipline. The author may have decided to limit it in certain ways, or to ignore certain theoretical angles. It may have originated in the context or evolution of the subject, in ongoing broils among scholars, or in the writer's own previous work. Some information fit for an introduction, like historical background, may appear. However, historical information in an introduction would be straight background for the subject and would launch the discussion proper. On the other hand, in a preface, historical information would be used to show how the author chose or handled the main point--how history generated a motive for the work. It would be used to clarify the relation of the author to the project, and of the project to the reader.

In some cases, writers use the preface to define more clearly the problem addressed by the book, as well as to underscore their current intentions. Statements of purpose are common.

Less common, but still pertinent, are discussions of how the writers became involved with the subject and the way the project evolved. Sometimes writers place a book in the context of their previous work, or show how it emerged logically from their developing interests.

A second major category of material in prefaces discusses the rhetorical choices made in the work. Writers explain their stylistic strategies (e.g., why they may have abandoned scholarly footnotes, or chosen endnotes), and they sometimes define their audience, especially if the choice of audience has had an influence on the text, or if the text stands to alienate some readers. Many writers preview the structure of the book and its rationale, and reinforce the sorts of connections they would like readers to make.

The construction of the speaker (persona) in a typical preface is worth noting. The term “construction of the speaker” implies that a writer, consciously or not, invents a self to utter and be represented by a text. If you have a written thesis, you have most likely adopted the formal role of professional researcher and scholar, which may require that you not depict yourself in the text, so that the information will appear more objective. Preface writers primarily adopt the role of author or designer; that is, they present themselves as the maker or writer of the work: “I made this, and now I’m discussing why I decided to make it the way I did.” The role is that of someone who can address the reader directly, from outside the formal constraints of the project. Even if your stance has excluded the pronoun “I” from your thesis discussion, you may still use it in the preface.

Preface writers also invariably construct themselves as thinkers. All the matters discussed--the concrete opportunities such as funding, the meetings with colleagues, travel, the growth of the interest in or modifications of the topic, the historical background, the theoretical problems and approaches, the obstacles, the stylistic choices--all are presented in the context of a thinker and maker finding the way, making strategic decisions, an understanding of which will help the reader appreciate the work better. You may discuss anything you choose, as long as it fits this purpose.

Moves to Avoid

Do not write an introduction.

Some writers devote the preface exclusively to a formal description of the problem, framing it as part of the main project. This is more appropriately the work of an introduction. When writers take up a problem description in a well-written preface, there is usually the sense that it is part of a larger treatment. That is, as you read along, the author’s personal voice may momentarily take on an air of formality, as in a lecture, to set the context of the problem. However, it is still the direct, personal voice that predominates in the piece as a whole. The authorial voice of the preface should be heard as a writer directly addressing the reader about the text.

Resist the inclination to construct your persona as that of a student or amateur.

Because you are new to many facets of research, there may be a natural tendency to present yourself as an amateur, a student who has elected to do an Honors thesis, or who had to switch advisors, or who had trouble with equipment. The more you focus on matters like these, the less space you have to present yourself as an active, practicing maker or thinker.

Of course, as a student, you are at a disadvantage compared to professional scholars and writers. For instance, you cannot position your work on a continuum of life-experience, previous publications, and your own developing scholarship. Adverse circumstances are often enough to scuttle a student research project (e.g., a key source of data going sour). Furthermore, student writers sometimes choose a problem or task for its intrinsic interest and importance to them, and struggle to make it work, whereas practicing professionals have access to the interpretive frameworks of entire disciplines and their communities of thinkers to sensitize them to relevant and timely issues. Nevertheless, some students find a degree of professional depth within their grasp. Honors Capstone projects do arise out of deep experience in students' majors, allowing them to represent themselves as thinkers in a field of intellectual activity or as practicing designers in an art. You should be strategic in examining the elements of your experience that echo professional interests.

An engaged artist, researcher, or writer is generally interested in the conceptualization of a project. Try to construct yourself as a thinker and maker foremost. How did you think your project through? What ideas guided your revisions and changes? Do you fit into the framework of an established school or method--or are you in a relationship of tension with one?

Do not chronicle all of your labors and tribulations.

Another representation that often appears in student prefaces is the writer as laborer. Capstone Projects can be brutal work. The panic of the final deadline, the April all-nighters, the setbacks at project sites are vivid and fresh in seniors' minds. These adventures contribute to a kind of "mountain-top experience," an immense sense of satisfaction and accomplishment at having dared fate and triumphed. Every research project has its good stories, but the preface is usually not the place for them. It is not intended to be a wide-open reflective essay on the meaning of the thesis experience to the writer, nor a chronicle of the entire process you went through to produce your final piece. Instead, it owes a debt both to both the project and the reader. It is a place where the writer explains whys and wherefores to readers who seek to gain a better understanding of the project they are about to read. A litmus test for including material are the questions: 1) Will it help improve the reader's understanding of the work? and 2) When it focuses on the author, is it in service to that understanding?

Do not indulge in self-assessment or self-critique.

A writer may express some satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the scope or shape of a project, or explain why some dimension is missing which the reader might reasonably expect. This helps a reader understand how the work relates to the writer's vision or intentions; it is another means of bringing the writer (and reader) into relationship with the work. However, wherever this function drops out of sight, self-critique devolves into an apology and can undermine your credibility. Biographical material can belong in prefaces, but it is never written with the motives or expectations of pure biography. It is part of the relation we have described to the project and the reader.

In conclusion, remember that the preface is addressed to a reader as part of an explanation of a project. You may still tell of hardships, explain the difficulties of the work, describe the evolution of your topic,

discuss its adequacies and inadequacies, and so forth. Be on guard, however, against indulging in these for their own sake.

Some Points to Remember

Address a reader who is seeking clarification of your work. Speak personally and directly to the reader in the first person ("I").

Most prefaces address how and why certain choices were made and what strategies were adopted.

Adopt the persona of a designer and thinker.

Introduce your project more than yourself, but speak of yourself if it gives perspective to the work. Your values, for instance, may be interesting to most readers, since they influenced your approach. The same is not true of your eating habits.

The preface is not for personal reflection, journalizing, autobiography, story-telling, or self-critique. It can include these elements, but only in the interest of explaining the project.

Menu of Possible Strategies for Prefaces

Of course, you could not do all of these things, nor are your choices limited to this list. Choose what most suits what you want to say.

Clarify and elaborate the main problem.

Show how the idea originated.

Explain why your subject is important.

Explain your treatment of the subject--what conscious strategies did you adopt?

Discuss the major decisions you had to make that influenced the shape of the project.

Underscore your purpose.

Explain the significance of this work to you; relate personal experiences only if they will help the reader understand it.

Show how this work fits with your other work or the work of other researchers or designers.

Define your intended audience.

Explain any stylistic idiosyncrasies or departures from standard conventions.

Preview and explain the rationale for the organization of the work.

Tell the readers how you would like them to comprehend the work.

Discuss the intellectual obstacles and problems you encountered.

Explain how you found your theoretical approach and how you applied it.

Compare or contrast your theoretical approach with other possibilities.

Explain where your work is positioned in relation to theoretical debates in your field.

Identify any general stance your work takes (Jungian, empirical, postmodern, feminist, cognitive).

Explain the personal values that influence the work.

Assess the project--but only insofar as it will strengthen the reader's appreciation.

Acknowledge and thank those who helped you.