Introductions and Openers

Successful introductions……

* Can often be more than one paragraph, unless your professor or discipline specifies otherwise. In fact, if you open with a brief anecdote or an overview, you probably need two paragraphs.
* Are specific. It’s hard for readers to relate to broad generalizations (“in today’s society…”), so try grabbing your audience’s attention with something vivid and relevant to the topic of your paper.
* Contain full names if people are mentioned and full titles if texts are mentioned.
* Keep background information to a minimum. The introduction is not the place to launch a full summary of a complex situation or concept, but you should provide contextual handholds for your readers. Usually, a half-sentence is enough.
* Explain the paper’s argument in clear, precise terms. By the end of your introduction, readers should not only have a grasp of what the argument is but should have a sense of what evidence you will be discussing. This does not mean you should provide a list: doing so will push you toward the five-paragraph essay formula. Instead, you should provide a concrete sense of which concepts or problems your paper will examine and what will count as proof.
* Motivate the argument clearly. Bear in mind that a thesis, on its own, is rarely enough to satisfy readers. You need to explain why your argument matters. That way, even if readers are unfamiliar with the specific topic of your paper, they understand the significance of your argument.

Unsuccessful introductions…..

* Contain no opener, instead beginning abruptly and/or unclearly
* Open with overly general or melodramatic claims (“Throughout history” or “Society has always….”)
* Get lost in abstract weirdness (“It is generally acknowledged that childhood is a time in life that has always been, according to its observers, preserved from the darkness and the harshness and the struggle that is present…”)
* Contain unsupportable claims, extraneous information, or padding (“People have always…” or “Society has long struggled with…”)
* Fail to provide context (they drop in an author’s name without explaining who that author is, etc.)
* Do not have a thesis
* Go on for too long. It’s fine if your introduction is more than one paragraph, but if it’s significantly more than one page – and the paper itself is less then 10 pages – this means you’re delaying the thesis too long (if you’re writing in a discipline that puts the thesis first). If this happens, double-check your work: is there information that can be trimmed or moved to a later paragraph?
* Contain grammatical or formatting errors. It can be hard to regain a reader’s trust, if the introduction seems hastily written or poorly proofread.