

Writing Strong Opening Paragraphs

General Observations from AP Readers:

1. There is no one right way to write an opening paragraph.
2. The opening paragraph is important as a *first impression* and for the way it affects a reader's attitude toward the paper. A paper can "recover" from a weak opening, but it's an extra burden to undo the reader's "first take" of the paper as lower half, immature, or dull.
3. Many students write "empty" openings, meaning that the content of the paragraph is shaped from what already exists in the prompt and is therefore "empty" of the writer's critical thinking.
4. Opening paragraphs can be any length, but the high scoring papers often have three to four sentences (or even a bit longer) whereas low scoring papers often have one to two.

What does NOT work well:

1. Rearranging or parroting the prompt but not adding anything from your own thinking (this is the "empty" opening discussed above).
2. Wording that is formulaic, and signaling a generic, "five-paragraph" essay will follow. These openings are weak because the writer sounds as though he or she is on "autopilot" rather than truly engaged in the text. No three part thesis statements!
3. Beginning with a broad, sweeping statement (i.e. "There have always been wars"), a cliché ("A picture is worth a thousand words"), or a truism (i.e. "Everyone wants to be loved"). In general, if you can say, "Duh!" after the statement, it falls into one of those categories.
4. In a rhetorical analysis prompt, listing the devices or strategies an author uses but saying nothing more about them (i.e. "The author uses diction, imagery, and point of view to express her ideas").

What DOES work well:

1. Weaving the key words of the prompt into the opening paragraph (and the whole essay) to show the reader you're focused on answering the prompt.
2. Making a "grabber" opening sentence that gives insight into the over-arching idea of the piece or conveys an essential truth from it.
3. Weaving in a short, essential word or phrase from the quotation that captures the "spirit" of the piece and signals a direction for the essay.
4. Writing an opening sentence that sets a context for the paper, often by describing what the writer is doing in a way that goes beyond the prompt – the statement comes from the critical thinking the student has done while reading the piece. This method shares an insight.