

Where to Start: Does Your Opening Paragraph Have You Stumped?

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Many writers get stuck when it comes to developing an opening paragraph for a paper. Most of the time, this is because they have lots of ideas swirling through their minds...but they don't yet know how to organize or channel those thoughts. First sentences can be a real source of writer's block, what with the shrill words of English teachers past ringing in one's ears: "You've got to pick just the right sentence; it could make or break your whole paper!" Relax -- first sentences, and opening paragraphs for that matter, can always be reworked at any point in your writing process. A common misconception among writers, especially student writers, is that they have to write the perfect opening paragraph before they can proceed with whatever it is they're writing. Oftentimes, though, one will discover an entirely new, or at least more effective, way of constructing the opening paragraph once a complete draft of the manuscript is written. In short, don't panic; the most important thing to do initially is to get your thoughts down on paper...you can always revise them later. Good opening paragraphs do contain a few essential components, however, which include the following:

1. an introduction to the topic the paper deals with (a general sentence or two will usually suffice);
2. background information about the topic (dates, statistics, scenarios, etc.) that will help familiarize your readers and generate interest; and
3. the paper's thesis statement (which is usually reserved for the last sentence of the opening paragraph and may also include a list of the reasons you'll use throughout the paper to support it).

The opening paragraph is important because it prepares readers for what they're about to read. This paragraph not only introduces readers to the topic at hand, it can also provide them (as well as the writer) with the paper's basic organizational pattern... if the reasons used to support the thesis are included as part of the thesis statement.

To illustrate this point, pretend your thesis is, "Music is not the only factor that can negatively influence a teenager's behavior." Now, take this one step further to include your reasons for the thesis: "Music is not the only factor that can negatively influence a teenager's behavior. Television viewing habits, upbringing, and the school environment may also be to blame." Even though this thesis statement is actually two sentences, it is still considered one statement; the first sentence is the thesis portion (meaning the overall point of your paper),

and the second sentence lets readers know in advance the kinds of information/arguments that are going to be presented in regards to the thesis.

See how a thesis statement of this type can be a directional tool of sorts in your opening paragraph? It lets your readers know that your paper is going to be organized according to three main points...television viewing, upbringing, and the school environment...as they relate to your thesis.