English III & IV
Guide for Writing Introductory Paragraphs

The introductory paragraph serves two purposes, each equally important: to state what your essay is about, and to indicate why it is important. To achieve the first goal, try to be as narrow as possible. Papers that begin, “Since the beginning of time, humans have …” are already off to a bad start. Good first sentences will introduce the text or texts that you are going to discuss and will specify the critical question you will engage. There is no reason to hesitate before getting to your topic; begin your essays at a full run.

Sample 1st sentence (on Franz Kafka’s The Trial):

Though many readers understand Kafka’s The Trial as a commentary on the arbitrary nature of the justice system, the author’s deeper concern is with the individual’s sense of guilt.

Some teachers recommend that students begin their essays with quotations. This technique is effective in getting you focused on the text from the beginning.

Sample 1st sentences (with quotation):

“Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one morning.” Kafka’s The Trial begins with a statement about Josef K.’s innocence and false arrest, but much of the rest of the novel deals with his internal sense of guilt.

After your opening, you need two to four sentences to develop your topic as you lead toward your thesis statement. The main function of these sentences is to clarify the issue that is at stake in your essay. Most of the time, the issue is an interpretive question that can be answered in different ways. In addition to elucidating your topic and explaining its importance in our understanding of the text, you should also bring in some textual evidence (though not necessarily quotations) to give your readers a general impression of your essay’s direction.

Sample Development Sentences (continuing from Samples, above):

Kafka portrays the justice system officials as being capricious and concerned only with power, but the majority of the text tracks Josef K.’s inner states, primarily his emotional reactions to the injustice he faces. As the story progresses, Josef becomes increasingly convinced that he is in fact guilty of something, though neither he nor the officials ever
specify what his crime is. In his frequent and frustrating dialogues with guards and judges, his passivity and lack of self-assertion suggest that, on some level, he agrees with his own condemnation.

A strong, narrow, and specific introductory paragraph like this one should lead seamlessly to your thesis statement, which should make a clear argument that the rest of your essay will defend.

**Sample Thesis Statement** (see “Guide to Thesis Statements” for more):

Ultimately, Kafka’s *The Trial* illustrates that injustice exists because individuals, who believe in their own natural sinfulness, believe that even the most innocent among us deserve to be punished.

**Literary Criticism in the introductory paragraph (for advanced students and research projects):**

Introductory paragraphs are also ideal for bringing in relevant critical arguments that you have found in your research. Again, you should look for quotations from the critical sources that are focused specifically on your topic. Most frequently, you will use quotations that support your argument or that make a contradictory argument, which you will then refute. In either case, using critical quotations is a sure way of alerting your readers that the issue you are addressing is important.

Finally, though your introductory paragraph is probably the first one you will write, it should also always be the last element you revise. Many students forget the second part of that advice, but the logic is persuasive: after you have drafted your entire essay, including your concluding paragraph, you often find that what you planned to write is different from what you have actually written, so you need to return to the introduction and make sure that it corresponds to your essay.