

## Unit Two

### The Basics of Opening Paragraphs: Topic, Issue, Thesis

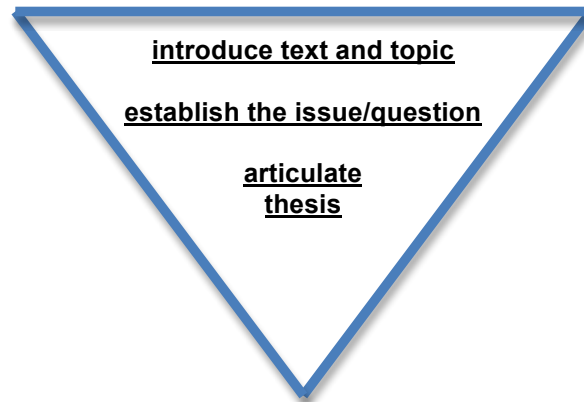
Strong opening paragraphs orient their readers not only to the topic at stake in a writer's paper but to the reasons why the reader should care about that topic.

#### Visualizing the Introduction

In an academic essay that enters into a critical conversation with other written sources, an effective opening paragraph needs to contain the following elements in order to establish this interest:

- the main authors/texts at stake in the essay
- the topic the essay will address in its discussion of those texts
- the issue, or problem, that needs exploring in relation to that topic
- the thesis, or main claim, the writer will advance in relation to that issue

Balancing each of these demands in a short but engaging opening paragraph is one of the hardest things a writer does. Some people find it helpful to imagine this process as an inverted triangle, or funnel.



In this diagram, the opening paragraph moves the reader from announcing what the paper is about (the topic) to a more specific, arguable claim (the thesis).

#### Tying the Sentences Together

In practice, however, the trick is figuring out how to get there. How do I get from introducing the texts I'm analyzing and the topic I'm interested in to a focused and arguable claim? If you think about it, the glue or ligament holding this triangle together is really the middle section: the problem, or issue, at stake in the topic of your paper. Only once you know what problem or question you're trying to address about a given topic can you determine how to take a strong stance or position in relation to it.

Compare the following sentences:

**(i) Obama’s speech in Tucson addressed the nature of national tragedy.**

**(ii) Specifically, his speech exposed the problem in how we respond to moments of national crisis. Should we embrace a standard view of American identity in such moments, or look to re-define our understanding of America?**

Notice the difference between these two groups of sentences. The first announces a topic in relation to the text at hand: we know the writer is going to touch on the topic of national tragedy in Obama’s 2011 speech.

But why? Why should we care to consider this? The next sentence begins to suggest a reason by raising a specific question about Obama’s discussion of national tragedy: what Obama’s discussion of tragedy has to say about American identity.

Raising such questions might then help lead the writer to his or her thesis, or claim.

**(iii) Obama’s answer to this question can be seen in his discussion of “sacrifice.” In this paper, I will argue that Obama’s use of “sacrifice” in his Tucson speech calls attention to our need to re-think our connection to each other as Americans.**

The writer, in this example, has used the question or problem to catapult the opening paragraph toward a claim. We now know what the writer has to prove in the subsequent paragraphs: that the use of “sacrifice” in the text of Obama’s address shows a complex idea about the nature of tragedy and our connectedness as Americans.

### **Sample Opening Paragraph**

Read the following sample opening paragraph. Where does the writer introduce the topic of the essay? Where does the writer raise a problem or issue? Where does the writer state the thesis? How does the writer tie these sentences together in order to orient the reader?

While it is often assumed that we, as students, automatically know how to respond to other writers’ views in an essay or paper, Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein offer specific advice about how to “enter the conversation” in an academic essay in their book *They Say, I Say*. Graff and Birkenstein argue that we should agree and disagree with other writers simultaneously in our writing, and they offer several strategies for how to do so. But is this sound advice? Does disagreeing and agreeing with another writer make one’s own argument stronger, or does it muddle one’s writing? As one sample student paper “The Pro’s and Con’s of Academic Freedom” shows, the answer, I believe, is clear. I argue that Graff and Birkenstein’s strategies can be usefully applied to such student papers because arguing on both sides of the question helps a writer convey a broader sense of authority in his or her own writing.