

## Step

# 4

## Writing the Opening Paragraph

For years, I've delivered a consistently harsh and loud message to my AP History students. Whenever they would begin an essay with mounds of fluffy narrative that English teachers might call setting, I would cut them off at the knees with a sharp, "Answer the stinkin' question!" For 16 years the AP World History FRQ and DBQ rubrics rewarded clarity and directness—no points for setting. Students often get lost in their own text when they try to set the stage for an answer that even they don't fully understand yet, so banning setting altogether usually resulted in better—and higher scoring—essays. But now, some things have changed.

The newest AP World History LEQ and DBQ essay rubrics now reward setting—if you do it well. It is still a terrible idea to begin your essay with a page of directionless fluff that you hope will end in an acceptable thesis. A well-planned, purposeful setting that establishes the historical context of your argument, however, followed by a clear and direct answer to the question prompt, will definitely boost your score. More specifically, a thoughtful statement of setting at the start of your essay might be the best way to earn the point for Contextualization.

The Contextualization point is earned by explaining the broader context within which your argument is best understood. Sometimes this context is a series of events or an historical era, but it may also be an historical theme or process. In any case, situating your argument within its broader context is now a great idea when writing AP essays. And the best place to contextualize your argument is probably within the opening paragraph in the form of a well-structured setting.

So feel free to indulge your English teacher on the new AP World History essays, and create a few sentences that set the stage for your argument. Then... answer the stinkin' question!

## Planning a Strong Opening

As with so many other components of good essays, there is really no absolutely correct way to develop your opening paragraph. Since clarity and directness are rewarded on both AP essay rubrics, we will develop a process that leads to a clear and direct opening paragraph.

For the sake of directness, don't spend *too much* space on setting in your essays. Although establishing the historical context for your answer is a great writing technique, too often students get lost in the setting and don't get to their thesis until page two. Instead, develop two to four sentences that can explain the historical "environment" within which your argument makes the most sense. Then write your thesis, and continue with your opening paragraph.

In the thesis, you addressed the tasks and terms of the question by stating explicitly WHAT you believe to be the answer to the question. You also outlined your three categories of evidence, which tell the reader HOW you intend to answer the question. If the thesis contains the answer to the question and all three categories of evidence, what are you going to write in the other sentences of the first paragraph? First, it should be noted that style and paragraph form are not assessed on the AP World History essay rubrics. So, if you write only the thesis in the opening paragraph, you will not be penalized. However, your essay will be well served if you develop your opening paragraph to state WHY your categories matter to your thesis—the same question you began to answer in your analytical thesis. One way to address this point is to write separate sentences for each category of evidence, answering briefly in each case, "Why does this matter to my thesis?"

## Step 4 Writing the Opening Paragraph

### **Guided Practice:** Presenting the Argument

**Directions:** For this set of exercises, you will practice all the skills covered so far in this book:

**Step 1:** Identify the tasks and terms

**Step 2:** Brainstorm specific evidence

**Step 3:** Develop a thesis and categories of evidence, and then outline your argument

Next, using the strategies outlined in the section above, write an opening paragraph for each thesis statement. The example below asks you to write an opening paragraph for the sample thesis shown, and is followed by a model solution to help you better understand the goal of this exercise.

**Exercise Question:** *Compare and contrast the impact of geography on the political, economic, and belief systems of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.*

**Sample Thesis:** Although both economies were rooted in the agriculture of fertile river valleys, the predictability of the Nile, coupled with Egypt's natural boundaries, promoted stable governments and a deeply rooted belief system, while the irregularity of the Tigris and Euphrates, as well as a lack of natural boundaries, helped to produce unstable governments and changing belief systems.

## Explanation

---

**Sample Opening Paragraph:** The nomadic peoples of the eastern Mediterranean survived for millennia in lands dominated by hot desert climates. They became adept at hunting and gathering in some of the most inhospitable regions of the world, and their ultimate success relied largely on taking advantage of relatively small fertile areas along the few rivers they encountered. It was the development of agriculture along these river valleys that resulted in two of the most prosperous centers of civilization in the world—Egypt and Mesopotamia. River valleys, like those in Egypt and Mesopotamia, were ideal locations for ancient farming communities to grow into long-lasting civilizations, because river flooding provided a constant source of fertile farmland in an otherwise harsh environment. Both civilizations benefitted to some degree from fertile farmland, but the precise location of each river valley and the particular nature of each river led to distinctions in terms of the political and economic stability of each particular civilization. Although both economies were rooted in the agriculture of fertile river valleys, the predictability of the Nile, coupled with Egypt’s natural boundaries, promoted stable governments and a deeply rooted belief system, while the irregularity of the Tigris and Euphrates, as well as a lack of natural boundaries, helped to produce unstable governments and changing belief systems in Mesopotamia.

The opening begins with a brief description of life in the lands of the eastern Mediterranean, describing the harsh climate and desert conditions endured by the nomadic peoples of western Asia and northern Africa. These few sentences set your reader up for the contrast of the more settled lifestyles of the river valley peoples. In the thesis—located at the end of the paragraph—we tell the reader that both Egypt and Mesopotamia benefitted from their locations in river valleys, but that the nature of those valleys influenced the specific outcomes. We also say HOW the essay will illustrate this point—through a comparison of fertile farmlands, predictability of floods, and natural boundaries. The sentences preceding the thesis explain briefly WHY our three categories of evidence help to distinguish between the civilizations of ancient Egypt and those of ancient Mesopotamia. Some restatement of each of these sentences

## Step 4 Writing the Opening Paragraph

could be used as topic sentences for our body paragraphs, but we'll save that discussion for Step 5.

### **Taking the Next Step**

Having completed your opening paragraph, you will have clearly told your reader **WHAT** you think is the answer to the question and **HOW** you will present the details of your argument. Once you've created this sturdy skeleton of an argument, now it's time to put some meat on the bones. In the next section, you will learn the best way to introduce specific evidence in the body of your essay, and how to best use that evidence in support of your thesis.