

Writing the Opening Paragraph

For years, I've delivered a consistently harsh and loud message to my AP European 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 55 years the AP European 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 European 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.

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So feel free to indulge your English teacher on the new AP European 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 European 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?"

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: *Analyze the ways in which Italian Renaissance art reflects Renaissance values. Cite specific works and artists in your response.*

Sample Thesis: Beginning in the 14th century, Italian artists, such as Michelangelo and Titian, reflected Renaissance values in their works through their use of humanist techniques, classical themes, and secular realism.

Explanation

Sample Opening Paragraph: Prior to the 14th century, artists devoted much of their work to the depiction of biblical scenes using highly symbolic imagery. Human characters in the were often anonymous foreground for the spiritual subjects. Artists spent little if any time attending to the physical traits of mere humans. Beginning in the 14th century, Italian artists, such as Michelangelo and Titian, reflected Renaissance values in their works through their use of humanist techniques, classical themes, and secular realism. Techniques, such as sculpting in the round, were reflective of Renaissance humanism, because

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they implied that man can understand his world. Classical themes of pagan mythology broke from the pre-Renaissance tradition of art focused on Christian subjects only. Finally, the use of realism in painting and sculpture utilized new techniques to focus on the human form rather than on Christian symbolism, as had been the practice before the Renaissance.

This opening begins with three brief sentences describing the artistic situation before the Renaissance. The setting quickly and purposefully establishes the value of our categories of evidence by highlighting the contrast between pre- and post-1300. In the thesis, we tell the reader that Michelangelo and Titian reflected Renaissance values in their works. We also say HOW the essay will illustrate this point—through humanist techniques, classical themes, and secular realism. Finally, in the subsequent sentences of the opening paragraph, we explain briefly WHY these three categories of evidence demonstrate Renaissance values. Some restatement of each of the sentences following the thesis could be used as topic sentences of each body paragraph, 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.