

Rubric Category	N/A: This TWR is intended to help during the planning process.
Argument Type	All arguments

# Starting Strong: Excellent Opening Sentences

*Students review common “traps” in introductions and practice new techniques for opening their essays.*

## Understanding the Expectations

Writing the introduction to an argument can be a real challenge because you need to accomplish many things with a small number of words. You need to give your reader a clear sense of what you’re going to argue and why they should care about it, and you also have to make sure you edit out anything that your reader *doesn’t* need to hear.

So how do you go from zero to full speed in the course of the paragraph? You have to carefully consider your readers’ perspectives and only include statements that help them understand what the essay is about and why they should care. Remember: your reader is somebody who has read the book, just not necessarily as recently or carefully as you have. What that means is that you don’t have to include any retelling of the plot.

## What Goes In

Even though you can assume your readers have read the book or story, you can't assume that they know what you're about to talk about or that they will care unless you give them a reason to. That means that your introduction should contain these elements:

- The topic of your paper
- The author and title of the text
- A reason for your reader to care about your essay
- Your main claim (thesis)

These are just priorities, not a formula, so you can accomplish them in practically any order and in a practically infinite number of ways. That's where your creativity and your unique claims come in.

## Common Traps

While it's important to "hook" your reader in by giving them something interesting and a reason to care, you want to avoid the common pitfalls, like:

- a general statement about life that nobody can disagree with, like "Everybody searches for love in their life."
- a dictionary definition, like "Williamson's Dictionary defines power as 'the state of being powerful.'"
- a question, like, "Why do people pursue power instead of love in their lives?"

While these common traps aren't wrong, exactly, they're not very interesting, creative, or specific, and they waste your reader's time by making general statements instead of starting off your essay on a strong, specific note.

## Flipping the Trap

However, since each of those common pitfalls comes from a good urge on the part of the writer, they can each be flipped into a more useful, specific statement that could set up a great essay. For example:

- A general statement about life can be rephrased into a specific statement about what the text has to say on the issue. Instead of "Everybody searches for love," try, "The characters in this text search for love in order to fill the emptiness they feel in their lives."

- A dictionary definition can be transformed into a strong statement if you define the word the way it shows up in the story instead, like, “In this text, sadness causes the main characters to fall into deep depression that prevents them from seeking happiness.”
- A question is probably the easiest to turn into a great statement, because often all you have to do is answer it. For example, if you asked the question above, you could answer it by saying, “Characters in this text pursue power instead of love because they are so afraid of the future.”

## Playing the Game

1. If you are working on a full draft, use your introduction for this game. If you are early in the writing process, review your list of claims and any ideas you’ve written down so far and choose at least one claim that you might want to use as the main claim for an essay.
2. Create a digital document or work in your notebook and make two columns. Label one “Trap” and one “Flip.”
3. Either on your own or with a group, fill in the trap column with at least one of the traps described above, but make it specific to your paper. If you have an introduction where you actually used one of the traps, you can include it, but if you don’t have an introduction yet, or you didn’t fall into any of the traps, you can have some fun writing traps. Write one of each (a general statement, a dictionary definition, and a question).
4. Your notes should look something like this (except your traps will be about your topic):

Trap	Flip
The overly broad statement (“Everybody searches for love.”):	
The dictionary definition (“Williamson’s Dictionary defines power as ‘the state of being powerful.’”):	
The rhetorical question (“Why do people pursue power instead of love in their lives?”):	

5. Now, flip the traps by writing a more useful version of each idea that is more focused on the text. It might look something like this:

Trap	Flip
Everybody searches for love.	The characters in this text search for love in order to fill the emptiness they feel in their lives.
Williamson’s Dictionary defines power as “the state of being powerful.”	In this text, sadness causes the main characters to fall into deep depression that prevents them from seeking happiness.
Why do people pursue power instead of love in their lives?	Characters in this text pursue power instead of love because they are so afraid of the future.

6. Now, choose one of your flips to use in the potential introduction for your essay.
7. If you have time, write—or rewrite—an introduction for your essay using one of your flips and including all the important elements of an introduction.

## Writing It Up

If you are early in the writing process, consider writing one or more potential introductions based on the claims you are working with and the flips you wrote during the game. If you are working with a full draft, you can improve your introduction by flipping a trap, by editing out unnecessary plot, or by ensuring you aren’t missing any of the key elements.