
Writing Your First Sentence

Do you struggle with how to write the first line of your paper's introduction? Or do you feel like you just can't write the rest of your paper until you get that first sentence? You are not alone! In the spirit of learning by example, check out the following quotes. They are all first sentences from peer-reviewed scholarly articles from various disciplines. The principle technique behind each sentence is also given.

❖ "The appeal to economists of estimation methods based on moment conditions is largely due to their intimate link to economic theory."

-- Nese Yildiz, "Consistency of Plug-in Estimators of Upper Contour and Level Sets (Econometric Theory, Vol. 28, Issue 2, April 2012)

How does it work? Establishes a current preference in the field and gives a reason for it. Will be discussed at greater length in the paper.

❖ "Current standard theory assumes spin/rotation to be the result of an initial impulse generated in the Big Bang conserved over billions of years of evolution in a frictionless environment."

-- N. Hamein and E.A. Rauscher, "The Origin of Spin: A Consideration of Torque and Coriolis Forces in Einstein's Field Equations and Grand Unification Theory," Beyond the Standard Model: Searching for Unity in Physics, by R.L. Amoroso et al. (eds) 2005, the Noetic Press

How does it work? Establishes a predominant theory in the field, which the paper will argue against.

❖ "In the past 15 years, many studies demonstrated associations between low birth weight and cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and their risk factors in adult life."

--Vincent W.V. Jaddoe & Jacqueline C.M. Witteman, "Hypotheses on the fetal origins of adult diseases: Contributions of epidemiological studies" (European Journal of Epidemiology, Vol. 21, 2006)

How does it work? Establishes the field of conversation in which the author is writing.

❖ "Within the rhetorical tradition of American civil religion, the United States is often depicted as divinely obligated to spread and defend democratic government throughout the world."

--Adam Gomez, "Deus Vult: John L. O'Sullivan, Manifest Destiny, and American Democratic Messianism (American Political Thought, Vol. 1, No. 2, September 2012)

How does it work? Presents a contentious, yet defensible, perception which appears to be held by many people.

❖ "For children, folkloric play communicates the body."

--Claiborne Rice, "Folk Illusions: An Unrecognized Genre of Folklore" (Journal of American Folklore Vo. 125, No. 498 [Fall 2012])

How does it work? Poses an interesting, unusual argument that must be defended. Creates a sense of mystery.

❖ "Ritual use of neurotropic fungi has been noted in several culture areas, most notably Mexico and Siberia."

--Brian P. Akers, et al. "A Prehistoric Mural in Spain Depicting Neurotropic Psilocybe Mushrooms?" (Economic Botany, Vol. 65, No.2, June 15, 2011).

How does it work? Although this sentence is uncomplicated, it presents the current state of the field (neurotropic fungi mostly found in Mexico and Siberia), which the paper will move beyond (they're also found in Spain).

❖ “When I asked thirteen-year-old Rose and ten-year-old Chip what made their evangelical Christian family different from other families, Rose explained that her family prays together, and her parents monitor what she watches on television.”

– Susan B. Ridgely, “Doing Ethnography with Child Consultants: Making the IRB Process Work” (Journal of American Folklore Vol. 125, No. 498, [Fall 2012])

How does it work? This sentence relies on contrast (prayer and television), and on “holding back” the mysterious or unusual component (television) until the end of the sentence. The television monitoring is both unexpected and intriguing. The sentence also establishes the central research around which the piece will revolve.

❖ “A significant body of prior literature examines relations between accounting quality and financial market characteristics, yet little prior research exists that analyzes the effects of accounting quality on investment.”

– Gary C. Biddle and Gilles Hilary “Accounting Quality and Firm-Level Capital Investment” (The Accounting Review, Vol. 81, No. 5, 2006)

How does it work? Establishes the current field of research, and shows a gap, which the paper will seek to fill in.

❖ “Islam has increasingly become an internal affair in several western European countries, where the Muslim population has grown to ten to fifteen million.”

– Ahmet T. Kuru, “Secularism, State Policies, and Muslims in Europe: Analyzing French Exceptionalism” (Comparative Politics, Vol. 41, No.1, Oct. 2008).

How does it work? Establishes a current state of affairs, which will be the central topic/concern of the essay.

❖ “A lot of ash has fallen on this purple land. During the twelve years of military dictatorship, Liberty was no more than the name of a plaza and a prison.”

– Eduardo Galeano, “The Dictatorship and Its Aftermath: The Secret Wounds” (Contemporary Marxism, No. 14, Fall 1986)

How does it work? Uses a poetic, culturally meaningful first sentence, the context of which is somewhat explained in the second sentence. Establishes a sense of mystery, cultural significance, and states the general topic of concern.

In Summary

There are many ways to write your first sentence, and it doesn't have to be complicated. Most of the time, first sentences set the stage for the paper by showing the context, or the conversation into which the paper is entering. You can do this by establishing the current state of the field, or by presenting an assumption in the field which you will either support or argue against. You should feel free to “jump right in” to your paper in your first sentence. You can also enter into your paper more subtly, either by using a relevant and artistic first sentence (as in “A lot of ash...”) or by using interesting syntax to create a sense of mystery, suspense, or contrast (as in “When I asked thirteen-year-old Rose...”). Just remember that your first sentence doesn't need to be fancy, and it shouldn't be agonizing. Don't get hung up on it—just jump right in!

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