

Samples of Opening Paragraphs for a Short Philosophy Paper

For illustrative purposes only

In what follows, you'll read 3 samples of opening paragraphs. The last example is a whole paper (on a topic totally different from ours), and it is a bit more sophisticated than what you are required to do. However, take a look at the structure and language: how concise and exact everything is. All of these samples are grade A material (the very last one is an A+). They all follow the basic structure I talked about.

The difference between an introduction like the one I was recommending not to write and this type of opening paragraph should be clear: If you want to call the opening paragraph an introduction, that's fine with me: all I want to stress is that you need to **get right to the point, stating the thesis of your essay, the side you'll be taking** (agree or disagree with the thesis) **and the reasons why you're taking that side**. After each sample below, I'll provide a short commentary of why I think that's a good opening / paper.

• Sample 1

Socrates on the Moral Authority of the State

In the *Crito*, Socrates makes some surprisingly strong claims about the moral authority of the state, which might even seem to be inconsistent both with another fundamental claim he makes in the *Crito* and with certain claims he makes in the *Apology*. I shall argue that although these claims seem to be in some tension with each other, the crucial claims about the authority of the state in the *Crito* can plausibly be interpreted in such a way as to remove any real inconsistency with the other claims.

Commentary: The opening paragraph is very concise, but very nicely written. The problem is plainly stated, and then I explain clearly what I'm going to do in the paper--all in just two sentences. There's no rambling introduction with sentences starting with "Since the beginning of time, mankind has pondered the mysteries of etc."

The style is straightforward, striving for clarity rather than literary flair. Jargon is avoided as far as possible.

However, the sentences are a bit too long for my taste. Try to avoid wordy sentences.

• Sample 2

Changing the Laws of Physics

Peter Van Inwagen ambitiously sets out to prove once and for all that we must choose between free will and determinism, because both cannot hold for this world. In "Determinism", he defines both determinism and free will, and gives a deductive argument for how these two ways of the world cannot coexist. His argument nearly succeeds, but for one error. In this paper, I will show how his conception of determinism fails simply because the "laws of physics" he envisions are problematic. In order for his "laws of physics" to work in the argument, they must be independent rules for understanding our world, but Van Inwagen does not give sufficient reason to interpret them as such.

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Robert R. Redfield



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