

Getting Started

The initial impact of your text is created by your opening paragraph. When constructing the first paragraph of your essay, it is vital, therefore, to remember that what you write in the first few lines will affect how your readers approach the reading of the rest of your text. This means getting your introduction right and making a positive first impression is essential. Your main aim is to establish clarity. The worst thing you could do when opening an academic essay is to be vague and long-winded, using techniques like the rhetorical question, which belong more to literary debate rather than academic discussion. Consider these brief opening paragraphs:

Essay title: Families should be responsible for the care of their elderly members. Discuss.

In Italy, where families are often tightly-knit, it is common for the elderly to live happily with their children. Increasingly, however, with the pace and stresses of modern life, many families are finding it increasingly difficult to take care of their parents. This essay will describe some of the problems involved in taking care of the elderly, and discuss who should be responsible for looking after the older members of our communities.

Essay title: Aid to poor countries has proved to be ineffective. Discuss.

Over the last fifty years, poor countries have received large sums of money from rich donor countries. Some of this money has provided much needed relief in areas affected by war or famine, while much of it has disappeared or made no apparent difference to the lives of the individuals this financial aid was intended to help. In this essay, solutions to ensuring how aid is used effectively will be proposed.

To make it clear to your reader the direction you intend to take, you should round off your introduction with a clear **statement of purpose**. Here are three examples:

1. [...] *This essay outlines the most common ideas in favour of early marriage.*
2. [...] *This essay will discuss the benefits of having universal free health care.*
3. [...] *This essay will examine some arguments against gun ownership.*

The statement of purpose is a sentence (or two) which formally states what you are setting out to do in your essay and operates as a signpost or map, indicating to the reader what direction you intend to take. You may choose to indicate how many parts your essay will have, so that the reader has an idea of what and how many ideas will be explored and how those ideas are presented in the structure of your essay. In a discussion of recreational drug use, the following statement of purpose clearly indicates that s/he intends to organise his/her essay in three parts:

4. [...] *The effects of drugs on the individual, the family, and society will be examined.*

Your statement of purpose is to be written in the third person, must be easily identified by your reader and will fit neatly with the preceding sentences of the opening paragraph. Consider again the statement of purpose in the example paragraphs above.

Here are common verbs used in the writing of a statement of purpose. It is important to remember that the word you choose must reflect the intention of the title. Consider how the choice of verb will alter the type of essay written and also the text organisation.

describe	compare	present	outline
analyze	look at	examine	discuss
explain	investigate	contrast	consider

If you are having problems formulating your opening paragraph, leave some space and write it after you have written the body or concluding paragraph, which is what normally happens in the writing of lengthy academic articles.