BEGINNINGS: A DOZEN SUGGESTIONS

Here are a few ideas on how to begin an essay:

1. Use an anecdote that leads into the main topic.
2. Describe a setting as background for the exposition to follow.
3. Use narration, beginning in the middle of things, inviting further reading.
4. Use an apt quotation relevant to the thought.
5. Give a firm statement of opinion, arousing the reader’s feelings.
6. Offer a prediction.
7. Give unusual or sensational detail.
8. Ask reflective questions.
9. Give a definition.
10. Use a figure of speech.
11. Use a play upon words.
12. Use humor.

Because the beginning is an important element in establishing a good relationship between writer and reader, several kinds of beginnings are therefore best avoided:

• The overworked beginning:
  --Webster’s dictionary defines “love” as . . .
  --In Book 1 of Gulliver’s Travels, Swift says . . .

• The perfectly obvious statement:
  --Brave New World confronts man with a question that has in the past and will in the future most certainly be a human problem.
  --The utopian society has always been considered the ideal society.
  --Gulliver’s Travels contains a very important thought that everyone should think about.

more . . .
• **The apology, complaint, or personal dilemma**  
I have now read “Love Among the Ruins” for the third and, I hope, the last time. I notice one element that is used sporadically throughout the story. The topic of which I am speaking is the use of the word “State” in the place of God’s name.

• **The panoramic beginning, typically a survey reaching back to the dim past**  
War is a topic that has been handled admirably by poets throughout the course of history and man’s conscious destruction of his fellow man. Homer first described “man’s inhumanity to man” and the results that war can have in his epic poem The Iliad. In the intervening years, the poet has continued to use war as the subject of his poetry, for war begets sorrow, and expressing emotion is the poet’s stock in trade.

  --Written as the opening of a student theme comparing two contemporary war poems

• **The mystery opening, making the theme dependent upon material from an outside source known to the instructor but to no other reader:**  
The main thing that I noticed in the poem was the way the tone changed from stanza to stanza.