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Practice exam question

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd at 100

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Guidance for the question on p. 19 of the magazine.

Compare these two opening paragraphs. Explain which is better.

Paragraph A

The viewpoint is a forthright dismissal of Christie's novel, which at first sight seems to be true, or at least have elements of truth. There are certainly stock characters — for example, Roger Ackroyd as the country gentleman with things to hide is the stereotypical murder victim and Hercule Poirot is the stereotypical genius detective. The setting is a familiar gossipy village with its country house and, at its heart, the novel involves a familiar puzzle mystery, in which the reader has a defined setting and a closed circle of suspects. The plot is driven by a mysterious murder, which sets up a logic puzzle for the reader who must work out who has committed the crime. Yet within those familiar elements, which I believe are better viewed as being generic rather than clichéd, the novel contains many elements that are innovative, meaning that *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is much more than the viewpoint claims: rather than being a clichéd example, it is a major development of the crime genre. This essay focuses on the role of Dr Sheppard as murderer and creator of a masterful metanarrative and aims to show that there is little about the novel that is clichéd, clunky or unsubtle.

Paragraph B

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd is more than being clichéd. The Dictaphone that the murderer uses, not to kill the victim but to create a way to give him a cover, is actually a clever thing. While a Dictaphone is to us in the twenty-first century old technology, to Christie's first readers it would have been a new technology. This would have been an exciting new way to help cover up a murder and in no way would be a red herring or a clichéd thing. What is more, the people in the book are a bit familiar, but they are not clichés. Ralph might be a red herring of a murderer, but he is not really a typical crime character. He is attractive and fun and while he might want his step father's money, to a modern reader in no way could you blame him. Also Shepherd is a brilliant character. As the doctor, you might expect him to look after the villagers as a shepherd looks after his sheep, but he is way more like a wolf in shepherd's clothes. In no way is he a cliché and the reader enjoys his story and being told it by him. So I think *The Death of Roger Ackroyd* is not a cliché book.

Commentary

Paragraph A is an assured introduction that fulfils the key functions of an opening paragraph in a debate-driven essay. It engages directly and explicitly with the exact wording of the question, framing

the claim about cliché as a 'viewpoint' to be tested rather than accepted. This establishes a clear evaluative stance from the outset. The paragraph operates at an effective overview level, identifying the novel as a closed-circle puzzle mystery and briefly outlining its familiar components — stock characters, village setting and logic-based plot — before reframing these elements as generic conventions rather than failings. This distinction shows secure understanding of the crime genre and its expectations, signaling that the student understands how familiarity can function productively within genre fiction.

As an introduction, the paragraph is logical, focused and clearly signposted. The final sentence is particularly effective: it names Dr Sheppard, introduces the idea of a 'metanarrative,' and makes clear that the essay will explore Christie's authorial methods, directly addressing the task's instruction. This helps the reader anticipate both the argument and the structure of what follows. The paragraph successfully orients the reader, establishes conceptual control and demonstrates confident awareness of how Christie both uses and transforms the conventions of the crime genre.

Paragraph B is not without interest, and it shows some engagement with relevant material from *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, particularly in its discussion of the Dictaphone and Dr Sheppard's narrative role. The comment about contemporary readers experiencing the Dictaphone as new technology gestures towards contextual awareness, and the metaphor of the 'wolf in shepherd's clothes' suggests an intuitive response to Christie's manipulation of narrative trust. These ideas could potentially be developed into a more effective argument later in the essay.

However, as an introduction, the paragraph is significantly less successful. It moves too quickly into specific details and examples without first establishing an overview or a clear line of argument. The wording of the question is only loosely engaged with, and key terms such as 'closed-circle puzzle', 'stock characters' and 'red herrings' are not systematically addressed. The paragraph lacks a sense of planning and direction, reading more like an underdeveloped main body paragraph than an opening. Expression is often imprecise, repetitive and occasionally inaccurate, which undermines clarity and authority. Most importantly, it does not clearly signal how the essay will develop or how Christie's authorial methods will be explored in a structured way. Overall, Paragraph B shows some understanding of character and plot, but it does not yet demonstrate the conceptual control, genre awareness or organisational clarity required of an effective introduction.

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