



Writing Center Academic Affairs

Tips on Organization

Often writers find themselves with a rich supply of ideas, but without satisfactory strategies for organizing the subsequent discussion. Yet, an essay that does not have a clear and logical presentation will make the reader work too hard to get the point. Problems with the overall organization of an essay can be caused by a lack of focus or development. No less serious, organization problems at the paragraph or sentence level can indicate a lack of awareness of the reader's needs, or of the many options for presenting ideas.

Essay-Level Organization

Organizing well begins at the highest level, that of your idea or focus. If you are having organization problems, first ask yourself if you have a clear focus. Can you point to a problem/purpose statement or thesis early in the essay? If you can, then you may merely need to reorganize your argument; if you cannot, then you probably want to clarify your purpose before you reconsider the presentation of your ideas. The following strategies can help with essay-level organization.

Expanding Code Words

Look for key words that have a great deal of meaning for you but may not be clear to your audience. Defining these terms will help you to consider the order in which you present ideas. Before you discuss a key concept, you must give your reader a definition with which to work.

Nutshelling and Teaching

By putting your ideas into just a few sentences, or a nutshell, you will be able to sort out the more important points from the less important supporting information. Teaching your ideas aloud to a willing listener will force you to think about how to present them so your audience will be able to follow and understand.

Building an Issue Tree

The issue tree can help you organize before you begin writing by giving you a structure for your argument, or you can create an issue tree for a draft to see whether its organizational pattern is clear. The issue tree is an upside down tree that allows you to arrange your ideas in a hierarchical order. The top level represents your most inclusive idea, and each lower level represents a less inclusive idea.

- Issue trees let you sketch out ideas and relationships.
- Issue trees let you visualize the whole argument to see how the pieces fit together.

- Issue trees help you generate new ideas when you see gaps in your argument.

Paragraph-Level Organization

Paragraphs are individual units that, like essays, have distinct shapes and purposes. The main purpose of any paragraph is to advance the thesis of the essay in some way. However, this does not mean that all paragraphs will develop ideas at the same level or degree of complexity. You may use one paragraph to introduce a top-level idea, several more to explain and develop that idea, and then a transitional paragraph to sum up and move to the next idea. Readers do expect paragraphs to follow a pattern. The following are some of the most popular, though no one pattern will work for every situation. As the author, you will have to choose an organizational pattern that best serves your purpose.

The TRI Pattern

In this familiar pattern, the author introduces a topic (T), refines or restricts it (R), and then illustrates (I) or develops it in the rest of the paragraph. With a long or complicated paragraph, the author may come back to the topic at the end and create a TRIT pattern.

The Problem-Solution Pattern

In this type of paragraph, the writer simply presents a problem and then solves it.

The Cause-and-Effect Pattern

Here, the writer presents an action and examines its results.

Chronological Order

In this pattern, the steps in a process, or a series of events are presented chronologically.

Tests of Paragraph-Level Organization

The Issue Tree

Pull out the key words from each sentence and use them to sketch an issue tree. Once you have represented the ideas in the tree, ask yourself if the subordinate ideas develop the main ones, whether you have addressed everything you promised to, and whether you got off on a runaway branch with one idea.

The Christensen Method

Indent each sentence in the paragraph to indicate its relationship to the others. For example, level one sentences may state main ideas while level two sentences develop these ideas. Level three sentences may develop the ideas in level two sentences. Once you have identified the function of each sentence, look at how you have placed them and ask whether they follow a logical and clear pattern.

Sentence-level Organization

Most American readers comprehend sentences best when presented with "old" or "given" information first, followed by new information. Using this pattern can help you to achieve clarity and coherence. However, like all rules, breaking this one can often introduce variety and create

a strong reaction. In general, first make sure your reader can process the information you present before you play with word order. The following sentence patterns show how you can use sentence structure to show relationships between ideas.

Coordinate Pattern

In this pattern, two equal simple sentences are presented in a parallel or contrasting relationship with each other.

Example: “Jo is a student, but she is already a very good writer.”

Subordinate Pattern

In the subordinate sentence, one idea is presented as less important than the other. That idea will also be grammatically subordinate, creating the dependent clause.

Example: “Although Jo is a student, she has already published her first novel.”

Modifying Pattern

The modifier adds information to a sentence, and the impact of that information will depend on where it is placed in the structure of the sentence. There are three options:

The Left-Branching Sentence

The modifying clause begins the sentence and creates anticipation on the part of the reader. If the clarifying main clause does not follow soon, the reader may become impatient.

Example: “Written during her high school years, Jo's first novel appeals to the teen audience.”

The Mid-Branching Sentence

The main material is interrupted to insert the modifying material. If the interruption is too long, the reader may become frustrated; used discreetly, this structure can be very powerful.

Example: “Jo's first novel, written while she was in high school, has great appeal to the teen audience.”

The Right-Branching Sentence

The right-branching sentence is the easiest to write and read. However, the author should be careful to avoid creating list-like sentences by simply adding on information indefinitely.

Example: “Jo's first novel has great appeal to the teen audience since it was written during her high school years.”

Information adapted from Linda Flower's *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing*. 4th ed. N.Y.: Harcourt, 1993.