

ORGANIZATIONAL COHERENCE IN ACADEMIC WRITING

This handout presents several ways to think about organizing your paper. As with other aspects of writing, organizing a paper presents us with choices. But before imposing a plan or structure on your ideas, be sure to allow your ideas to generate freely and creatively. Once you have an idea of what you want to say, then it will be time to decide how to arrange your material.

THE INTRODUCTION

Your introduction may be one or several paragraphs. We list some options below, but here is one piece of firm advice: make sure your first paragraph contains your thesis statement, the controlling idea for your paper (usually it comes near the end of that paragraph). Don't take longer than one paragraph to get to that thesis statement.

The successful introduction

- ❶ **Arouses the reader's curiosity as it prepares to announce the thesis**
- ❷ **Focuses the reader's attention on the thesis, your central informing principle**
- ❸ **Establishes bridges, even empathy, between writer and reader**

Questions to ask about your introduction:

1. Do the first four sentences attract the reader's interest?
2. Is the subject clearly defined?
3. Is the introduction too long?

Introductions to avoid:

1. Throat-clearing: more or less irrelevant warm-up as you approach the topic itself
2. Trite or overused approaches: "Webster defines 'power' as..."; "I am going to write about...."
3. The perfectly obvious statement: "Domestic violence is a serious social problem today."

Take the time to look at the beginnings by professional writers or in social work journals. What patterns do you notice? What do you appreciate? What interests you, what puts you off, in the opening section? Good writers convey confidence, even daring, in the introductory sections. Consider using humor, a personal anecdote, or a bold assertion.

THE CONCLUSION

Usually your conclusion should begin with a restatement of your thesis and end with more general statements that grow out of this controlling idea. By now your reader is familiar with your evidence, so you can conclude with the more complex ideas for which you have been building a case. If possible, make your conclusion memorable: a quotation, a strong image, a powerful idea or call to action. Try to end with a bang and not a whimper. Give the sense of assurance, of business completed. The successful conclusion

- ❶ **Refreshes the reader's memory by summarizing the main points***
- ❷ **Satisfies the reader that the argument or idea has been effectively presented by the writer**
- ❸ **Focuses the reader's attention on the thesis itself as an important idea**

* Be wary of repetition in a summary of a 500-word paper!

Questions to ask about your conclusion:

1. Do I stop when I am ready to stop? Does the reader gain a sense of completeness?
2. Do I make my "final words" memorable in some way, and not a dry summation?
3. Have I covered all the points the paper "promised" to cover?

Conclusions to avoid:

1. Over-telling or -explaining your paper's points or ideas.
2. The obvious statement, when your paper has already presented the point
3. Any statement that suggests you are not confident or satisfied with the paper

THE BODY OR MIDDLE

The middle of the paper--the lengthy series of paragraphs or pages that link our beginning to our ending--is where we need to consciously decide about how we will develop our paper. After we know in general what we want to say and how we plan to convince our reader, we need to construct the paper along a plan that flows smoothly from section to section. The reader should not feel that sections are out of place or that ideas appear in unexpected points. In many ways, the arrangement should not be noticed by the reader: instead, he or she should become aware of the skillful, even subtle way in which you make your points, support your ideas, acknowledge your debts to others, refute counter arguments, all the while keeping your paper interesting and insightful. Here are some ways to ensure that your paper develops successfully:

- ❶ Use appropriate transitions: *similarly, on the other hand, for example, consequently*
- ❷ See if you can identify the pattern of development that your paper exhibits
- ❸ Identify subsections or "paragraph blocs" linked by the same idea, adequately developed
- ❹ Use subtle echoes of key words or phrases to keep the idea linked for your reader

A useful test: *can you describe in a single sentence how a mid-length section (2-5 pages for a longer paper) is held together?* As the body of the paper develops, make sure the main points all point back to the thesis statement and that the ideas relate to each other, or cohere.

Patterns of Development

Here are some choices for how to develop or structure your paper. These patterns may apply to the overall paper, or to a linked series (bloc) of paragraphs. For example, overall the paper may follow a *chronological/process* pattern of development, but one section may be handled via *narration*, to tell a story, in the midst of the overall time-related development. Other choices include description, which uses concrete and specific details that appeal to our senses. Or a paper (or series of paragraphs) can move *inductively*, from particular to general, or *deductively*, from the general to a logical inference, either general or particular. Your paper can also be organized by *comparison and contrast*, or by *classifications* or *groups*.

You can plot out the development of your paper via a formal outline, or you can sketch out a pattern of blocks on a blank sheet of paper, each block representing a small section of your paper. (In a short paper, each block can represent a single paragraph.) Outlines and blocks allow you to see the map or direction of your paper, and helps ensure that related material is kept together.

The Job of Linking Paragraphs

Many writers organize a paper successfully by paying close attention to the smaller unit of the *paragraph*. If your paragraphs and paragraph blocs develop clearly and logically, chances are your paper will also cohere and follow a plan that works for the content you are relating. Here are a few suggestions about paragraphs:

- ❶ Most paragraphs follow similar patterns of topic statement, restatement, and illustration/evidence.
- ❷ You can vary this pattern at any time, but keep in mind that all three segments need to occur.
- ❸ Note whether your ideas move from general to particular; be consistent within the same paragraph.

Be careful that your paragraphs do not resemble those of the newspaper or popular press, each containing only a few (or even only one!) sentence. This sort of paragraph is not useful for academic writing, and does not allow you to develop your ideas effectively or support them well.

For a useful discussion of paragraph development, visit the web site for the Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/paragraphs.html