How to Structure & Organize Your Paper

Organizing Your Thoughts

Making sense out of your observations about a text is a difficult task. Even once you've figured out what it is that you want to say, you are left with the problem of how to say it. With which idea should you begin? Should you address the opinions of other thinkers? As to that stubborn contradiction you've uncovered in your own thinking: what do you do with that?

Writing papers in college requires that you come up with sophisticated, complex, and even creative ways of structuring your ideas. Accordingly, there are no simple formulae that we can offer you that will work for every paper, every time. We can, however, give you some things to think about that will help you as you consider how to structure your paper.

Let Your Thesis Direct You

Begin by listening to your thesis. If it is well-written, it will tell you which way to go with your paper. Suppose, for example, that in responding to Richard Pipes' book, *The Russian Revolution,* you have written a thesis that says:

The purpose of the Russian Revolution was not only to revise Russia's class system, but to create a new world, and within that world, a new kind of human being.

This thesis provides the writer (and the reader) with several clues about how best to structure the paper. First, the thesis promises the reader that it will argue that the Russian Revolution was not simply a matter of class. The paper will therefore begin by saying that although the destruction of the Russian class system was important to the heart of this revolution, it was not its final goal. The rest of the paper will be broken into two parts: the revolution's vision of world communism, and (even more important) its vision of the new *homo sovieticus* - or soviet human being.

I say that this idea of the *homo sovieticus* is more important than the idea of a new world order not because the Russian revolutionaries thought so, but because the writer seems to say so in her thesis. Read the thesis sentence again. Note how the emphasis falls on the last phrase: "A new kind of human being." The emphasis in this sentence dictates the emphasis of the entire paper. We expect, as readers, that the other issues taken up in this paper - the destruction of class, the invention of a new world order - will be discussed in terms of creating a new kind of human being. In other words, we won't be given simply a description of how this revolution intended to affect world economy; we will be given a description of how this revolution intended to manipulate economic conditions so that they would be more favorable to the evolution of the new Soviet person.

Sketching Your Argument

While your thesis will provide you with your paper's general direction, it will not necessarily provide you with a plan for how to organize all of your points, large and small. Here it might be helpful to make a diagram or a sketch of your argument.
In sketching your argument your goal is to fill the page with your ideas. Begin by writing your thesis. Put it where your instincts tell you to: at the top of the page, in the center, at

the bottom. Around the thesis, cluster the points you want to make. Under each of these points, note the observations you've made and the evidence you'll use. Don't get nervous when your sketch starts to look like a mess. Use arrows. Draw circles. Take up colored pens. Any of these methods can help you to find connections between your ideas that otherwise might go unseen. Working from your sketch, try to see the line of reasoning that is evolving.

Sketching is an important step in the writing process because it allows you to explore visually the connections between your ideas. If you outline a paper too early in the writing process, you risk missing these connections. You line up your argument - A. B. C. - without fully understanding why. Sketching your argument helps you to see, for example, that points A and C really overlap and need to be thought through more carefully.

Outlining Your Argument

When you've finished your sketch, you're ready to make an outline. The task of your outline is to find your paper's "best structure." By "best structure," we mean the structure that best supports the argument that you intend to make.

When you are outlining a paper, you'll have many options for your organization. Understand, however, that each choice you make eliminates dozens of other options. Your goal is to come up with an outline in which all your choices support your thesis. In other words, your goal is to find the "best structure" for your argument.

Treat the outline as if it were a puzzle that you are trying to put together. In a puzzle, each piece has only one appropriate place. The same should be true of your paper. If it's easy to shift around your ideas - if paragraph five and paragraph nine could be switched around and no one would be the wiser - then you haven't yet found the best structure for your paper.

Keep working until your outline fits your idea like a glove.

When you think you have an outline that works, challenge it. I've found when I write that the first outline never holds up to a good interrogation. When you start asking questions of your outline, you will begin to see where the plan holds, and where it falls apart. Here are some questions that you might ask:

- Does my thesis control the direction of my outline?
- Are all of my main points relevant to my thesis?
- Can any of these points be moved around without changing something important about my thesis?
- Does the outline seem logical?
- Does my argument progress, or does it stall?
- If my argument seems to take a turn, mid-stream, does my thesis anticipate that turn?
- Do I have sufficient support for each of my points?
- Have I made room in my outline for other points of view about my topic?
- Does this outline reflect a thorough, thoughtful argument? Have I covered the ground?

Modes of Arrangement: Patterns for Structuring Your Paper

We've told you that there are no formulae for structuring your paper. We've put you through the very difficult task of finding a structure that works for you. Having done all of this, we are now ready to say that there indeed exist some general models for arranging information within a paper. These models are called "modes of arrangement." They describe different ways that information might be arranged within a text.

The modes of arrangement include:

- Narration: *telling a story*
- Description: *relating what you see, hear, taste, feel, and smell*
- Process: *describing a sequence of steps necessary to a process*
- Definition: *illustrating the meaning of certain words or ideas*
- Division and Classification: *grouping ideas, objects, or events into categories*
- Compare and Contrast: *finding similarities and/or differences between topics*
- Analogy: *making a comparison between two topics that initially seem unrelated*
- Cause and Effect: *explaining why something happened, or the influence of one event upon another*

****SEE THE OWRC HANDOUT SECTION FOR SELECT PAPER MODEL OUTLINES****

Your entire paper might be a compare and contrast paper, or you might begin a paper by describing a process, and then explore the effect of that process on something else. Try to be aware of what your purpose is at any given point of your paper, and be sure that this purpose is arranged appropriately. It confuses the reader, after all, if you muddle together your description of a process with its effects.

Constructing Paragraphs

Imagine that you've written your thesis. You've interrogated your outline. You know which modes of arrangement you intend to use. You've settled on a plan that you think will work. Now you have to go about the serious business of constructing your paragraphs.
You were probably told in high school that paragraphs are the workhorses of your paper. Indeed, they are. If a single paragraph is incoherent or weak, the entire argument might fail. It's important that you consider carefully the "job" of each paragraph. Know what it is you want that paragraph to do. Don't allow it to go off loafing.

What is a paragraph?

A paragraph is generally understood as a single "unit" of a paper. What your reader expects when he enters a new paragraph is that he is going to hear you declare a point and then offer support for that point. If you violate this expectation - if your paragraphs wander aimlessly among a half dozen points, or if they declare points without offering any evidence to support them - then the reader becomes confused or irritated by your argument. He won't want to read any further.

What should a paragraph do?

At the risk of being silly, consider this. What you look for in a partner, a reader looks for in a paragraph. You want a partner who is supportive, strong, and considerate to others. Similarly, a good paragraph will:

> **Be Supportive.**
> Even in the most trying of times a good paragraph will find a way to support the thesis. It will declare its relationship to the thesis clearly, so that the whole world knows what the paragraph intends to do. **In other words, a supportive paragraph's main idea clearly develops the argument of the thesis.**

Be Strong.
A good paragraph isn't bloated with irrelevant evidence or redundant sentences. Nor is it a scrawny thing, begging to be fed. It's strong and buffed. You know that it's been worked on. **In other words, a strong paragraph develops its main idea, using sufficient evidence.**

Be Considerate.
Good paragraphs consider their relationship to other paragraphs. A good paragraph never interrupts its fellow paragraphs to babble on about its own, irrelevant problems. A good paragraph waits its turn. It shows up when and where it's supposed to. It doesn't make a mess for other paragraphs to clean up. **In other words, a considerate paragraph is a coherent paragraph. It makes sense within the text as a whole.**

Writing the Topic Sentence

Just as every paper requires a thesis to assert and control its argument, so does every paragraph require a topic sentence to assert and control its main idea. Without a topic sentence, your paragraphs will seem jumbled, aimless. Your reader will find himself confused.

Because the topic sentence plays an important role in your paragraph, it must be crafted with care. When you've written a topic sentence, ask yourself the following questions:

- *Does the topic sentence declare a single point of my argument?* Because the reader expects that a paragraph will explore ONE idea in your paper, it's important that your topic sentence isn't too ambitious. If your topic sentence points to two or three ideas, perhaps you need to consider developing more paragraphs.
- *Does the topic sentence further my argument?* Give your topic sentences the same "so what?" test that you gave your thesis sentence. If your topic sentence isn't interesting, your paragraph probably won't serve to further the argument. Your paper could stall.
- *Is the topic sentence relevant to my thesis?* It might seem so to you, but the relevance may not be so clear to your reader. If you find that your topic sentence is taking you into new ground, stop writing and consider your options. You'll either have to rewrite your thesis to accommodate this new direction, or you will have to edit this paragraph from your final paper.
- *Is there a clear relationship between this topic sentence and the paragraph that came before?* It's important to make sure that you haven't left out any steps in the process of composing your argument. If you make a sudden turn in your reasoning, signify that turn to the reader by using the proper transitional phrase - *on the other hand, however,* etc.
- *Does the topic sentence control my paragraph?* If your paragraph seems to unravel, take a second look. It might be that your topic sentence isn't adequately controlling your paragraph and needs to be re-written. Or it might be that your paragraph is moving on to a new idea that needs to be sorted out.
- *Where have I placed my topic sentence?* Most of the time a topic sentence comes at the beginning of a paragraph. A reader expects to see it there, so if you are going to place it elsewhere, you'll need to have a good reason and a bit of skill. You might justify putting the topic sentence in the middle of the paragraph, for example, if you have information that needs to precede it. You might also justify putting the topic sentence at the end of the paragraph, if you want the reader to consider your line of reasoning before you declare your main point.

Developing Your Argument: Evidence

Students often ask how long a paragraph ought to be. Our response: "As long as it takes." It's possible to make a point quickly. Sometimes it's desirable to keep it short. Notice the above paragraph, for example. We might have hemmed and hawed, talked about short paragraphs and long paragraphs. We might have said that the average paragraph is one-half to two-thirds of a page in length. We might have spent time explaining why the too-short paragraph is too short, and the too-long paragraph too long. Instead, we cut to the chase. After huffing and puffing through this paragraph (which is getting longer and longer all the time) we'll give you the same advice: a good paragraph is as long as it needs to be in order to illustrate, explore, and/or prove its main idea.

But length isn't all that matters in paragraph development. What's important is that a paragraph develops its idea fully, and in a manner that a reader can follow with ease. Let's consider these two issues carefully. First: how do we know when an idea is fully developed? If your topic sentence is well-written, it should tell you what your paragraph needs to do. If my topic sentence declares, for example, that there are two conflicting impulses at work in a particular fictional character, then my reader will expect that I will define and illustrate these two impulses. I might take two paragraphs to do this; I might take one. My decision will depend on how important this matter is to my discussion. If the point is an important one, I take my time. I also (more likely than not) use at least two paragraphs. In this case, a topic sentence might be understood as controlling not only a paragraph, but an entire section of text.

When you've written a paragraph, ask yourself these questions:

- Do I have enough evidence to support this paragraph's idea?
- Do I have too much evidence? (In other words, will the reader be lost in a morass of details, unable to see the argument as a whole?)
- Does this evidence clearly support the assertion I am making in this paragraph, or am I stretching it?
- If I am stretching it, what can I do to persuade the reader that this stretch is worth making?
- Am I repeating myself in this paragraph?
- Have I defined all of the paragraph's important terms?
- Can I say, in a nutshell, what the purpose of this paragraph is?
- Has the paragraph fulfilled that purpose?

Developing Your Argument: Arrangement

Equally important to the idea of a paragraph's development is the matter of the paragraph's arrangement. Paragraphs are arranged differently for different purposes. For example, if you are writing a history paper and wish to summarize a sequence of events, you of course will arrange your information chronologically. If you are writing a paper for an art history course in which you want to describe a painting or a building, then you will perhaps choose to arrange your information spatially. If you are writing a paper for a sociology course in which you have been asked to observe the behaviors of shoppers at a supermarket, you might want to arrange your ideas by working from the specific to the general. And so on. You will also want to consider your method of reasoning when you construct your paragraph. Are you using inductive logic, working from clues towards your conclusion? If so, your paragraph will reflect this way of thinking: your evidence will come early on in the paragraph, and the topic sentence will appear at the end. If, on the other hand, you are using deductive logic, your paragraph will very likely be arranged like a syllogism. (For more information about constructing logical paragraphs, see Logic and Argument.)

Finally, remember that the modes of discourse that we outlined earlier can also serve as models for arranging information within a paragraph. If the purpose of a particular paragraph is to make a comparison, for example, your paragraph would be structured to assert that "A is like B in these three ways." And so on.

Coherence

OK, so you've gotten this far: you have your thesis, your topic sentences, and truckloads of evidence to support the whole lot. You've spent three days writing your paragraphs, making sure that each paragraph argues one point and that this point is well supported with textual evidence. But when you read this essay back to yourself, you feel a profound sense of disappointment. Though you've followed your outline and everything is "in there," the essay just doesn't seem to hold together. It could be that you have a problem with coherence.
A lack of coherence is easy to diagnose, but not so easy to cure. An incoherent essay doesn't seem to flow. Its arguments are hard to understand. The reader has to double back again and again in order to follow the gist of the argument. Something has gone wrong. What?

Look for these problems in your paper:

1. *Make sure that the **grammatical subject** of your sentences reflects the **real subject** of your paragraph.* Go through your paragraph and underline the subjects of all your sentences. Do these subjects match your paragraph's subject in most cases? Or have you stuck the paragraph's subject into some other, less important part of the sentence? Remember: the reader understands an idea's importance according to where you place it. If your main idea is hidden as an object of a preposition in a subordinate clause, do you really think that your reader is going to follow what you are trying to say?
2. *Make sure that your grammatical subjects are **consistent.*** Again, look at the grammatical subjects of all your sentences. How many different subjects do you find? If you have too many different sentence subjects, your paragraph will be hard to follow. (Note: For the fun of it, underline the sentence subjects in paragraph one. You'll find three, more or less: you, the subject, and the reader. The relationship between the three is what this paragraph is all about. Accordingly, the paragraph is coherent.)
3. *Make sure that your sentences look **backward** as well as **forward.*** In order for a paragraph to be coherent, each sentence should begin by linking itself firmly to the sentence that came before. If the link between sentences does not seem firm, use an introductory clause or phrase to connect one idea to the other.
4. *Follow the principle of moving from **old** to **new.*** If you put the old information at the beginning of the sentence, and the new information at the end, you accomplish two things. First, you ensure that your reader is on solid ground: she moves from the familiar to the unknown. Second, because we tend to give emphasis to what comes at the end of a sentence, the reader rightfully perceives that the new information is more important than the old.
5. *Use repetition to create a sense of **unity.*** Repeating key words and phrases **at appropriate moments** will give your reader a sense of coherence in your work. Don't overdo it, however. You'll risk sounding redundant.
6. *Use **transition** markers wisely.* Sometimes you'll need to announce to your reader some turn in your argument. Or you'll want to emphasize one of your points. Or you'll want to make clear some relationship in time. In all these cases you'll want to use transition markers.

Here are some examples:

- To show place - *above, below, here, there,* etc.
- To show time - *after, before, currently, during, earlier, later,* etc.
- To give an example - *for example, for instance,* etc.
- To show addition - *additionally, also, and, furthermore, moreover, equally important,* etc.
- To show similarity - *also, likewise, in the same way, similarly,* etc.
- To show an exception - *but, however, nevertheless, on the other hand, on the contrary, yet,* etc.
- To show a sequence - *first, second, third, next, then,* etc.
- To emphasize - *indeed, in fact, of course,* etc.
- To show cause and effect - *accordingly, consequently, therefore, thus,* etc.
- To conclude or repeat - *finally, in conclusion, on the whole, in the end,* etc.

Introductions and Conclusions

Introductions and conclusions are among the most challenging of all paragraphs. Why? Because introductions and conclusions must do more than simply state a topic sentence and offer support. Introductions and conclusions must synthesize and provide context for your entire argument, and they must also make the proper impression on your reader.
Introductions

Your introduction is your chance to get your reader interested in your subject. Accordingly, the tone of the paragraph has to be just right. You want to inform, but not to the point of being dull; you want to intrigue, but not to the point of being vague; you want to take a strong stance, but not to the point of alienating your reader. Pay attention to the nuances of your tone. Seek out a second reader if you're not sure that you've managed to get the tone the way you want it.

Equally important to the tone of the introduction is that your introduction needs to "place" your argument into some larger context. Some strategies follow:
Announce your topic broadly, then declare your particular take.
For example, if you are interested in talking about the narrator in Virginia Woolf's novels, you might 1) begin by saying that Woolf's narrator has posed a problem for many of her critics; 2) provide a quick definition of the problem, as others have defined it; and 3) declare your thesis (which states your own position on the matter).

Provide any background material important to your argument.

If you are interested in exploring how turn of the century Viennese morality influenced the work of Sigmund Freud, you will in your introduction want to provide the reader, in broad strokes, a description of Vienna circa 1900. Don't include irrelevant details in your description; instead, emphasize those aspects of Viennese society (such as sexual mores) that might have most influenced Freud.

Define key terms, as you intend to make use of them in your argument.

If, for example, you are writing a philosophy paper on the nature of reality, it is absolutely essential that you define the term for your reader. How do you understand the term "reality," in the context of this paper? Empirically? Rationally? Begin with a definition of terms, and from there work towards the declaration of your argument.
Use an anecdote or quotation.

Sometimes you will find a terrific story or quotation that seems to reflect the main point of your paper. Don't be afraid to begin with it. Be sure, however, that you tie that story or quotation clearly and immediately to the main argument of your paper.

Acknowledge your opponents.
When you are writing a paper about a matter that is controversial, you might wish to begin by summarizing the point of view of your adversaries. Then state your own position in opposition to theirs. In this way you place yourself clearly in the ongoing conversation. Be careful, though: you don't want to make too convincing a case for the other side.

Remember: your introduction is the first impression your argument will make on your reader. Take special care with your sentences so that they will be interesting. Also, take the time to consider who your readers are and what background they will bring with them to their reading. If your readers are very knowledgeable about the subject, you will not need to provide a lot of background information. If your readers are less knowledgeable, you will need to be more careful about defining your terms.

Finally, you might want to consider writing your introduction AFTER you've written the rest of your paper. Many writers find that they have a better grip on their subject once they've done their first draft. This "better grip" helps them to craft an introduction that is sure-footed, persuasive, interesting, and clear. (Note: Any changes that you make to an introduction and/or thesis statement will affect the paper that follows. Simply adding the new introductory paragraph will not produce a "completed" paper.)

Conclusions
Conclusions are also difficult to write. How do you manage to make the reader feel persuaded by what you've said? Even if the points of your paper are strong, the overall effect of your argument might fall to pieces if the paper as a whole is badly concluded. Many students end their papers by simply summarizing what has come before. A summary of what the reader has just read is important to the conclusion - particularly if your argument has been complicated or has covered a lot of ground. But a good conclusion will do more. Just as the introduction sought to place the paper in the larger, ongoing conversation about the topic, so should the conclusion insist on returning the reader to that ongoing conversation, but with the feeling that they have learned something more. You don't want your reader to finish your paper and say, "So what?" Admittedly, writing a conclusion isn't easy to do.

Many of the strategies we've listed for improving your introductions can help you to improve your conclusions as well. In your conclusion you might:

- Return to the **ongoing conversation**, emphasizing the importance of your own contribution to it.
- Consider again the **background information** with which you began, and illustrate how your argument has shed new light on that information.
- Return to the **key terms** and point out how your essay has added some new dimension to their meanings.
- Use an **anecdote or quotation** that summarizes or reflects your main idea.
- Acknowledge your **opponents** - if only to emphasize that you've beaten them.
- Remember: **language** is especially important to a conclusion. Your goal in your final sentences is to leave your ideas resounding in your reader's mind. Give her something to think about. Make your language ring.