

Organizing Your Paper: A Few Choice Words

No. 11 in the Writing Center Handbook Series

Is your essay as messy as your dorm room? Are your ideas as jumbled as students in the lunch-time rush to the dining hall? Get organized! At least as important as the information you use to prove your thesis is how you present that information — how you organize your essay. Here are a few words about organization to remember when writing and revising essays.

Thesis. Always keep the thesis in mind. Each paragraph and each example should advance your idea and support your argument. Using the thesis as a thread that runs throughout your paper will unite and organize the ideas.

Outline. Create an outline based on a draft, or form an outline early in the writing process. Outlines will make it easier to isolate the main ideas and determine how to arrange them.

Hierarchy. Determine which ideas are most important, which examples are the strongest, and how everything relates to the thesis. Be sure to emphasize the most important ideas and spend fewer words on less crucial parts.

Relationships. Ideas that are closely related should be near each other, in the same paragraph or adjacent paragraphs. This organization method shows connection between supporting arguments and keeps your reader from feeling like she is reading the same examples over and over.

Consistency. Be consistent in your organization. For example, if the first three points are organized chronologically, organize the rest of the essay similarly.

No redundancy. Once you prove a supporting idea in a paragraph or section, move on to the next point. Refer to earlier ideas in your paper for comparison or continuity, but don't prove the same idea in every paragraph. Each paragraph should add something new to the thesis discussion.

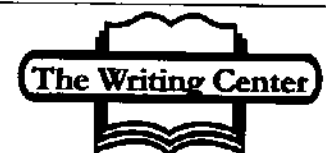
Expectations. The success of a well-organized paper lies in raising and meeting the reader's expectations. If you raise a question in one paragraph, the reader will expect an answer in the following paragraphs. Expectations move the reader through the essay; meeting those expectations develops the thesis.

Grand finale. Craft your essay so that the strongest ideas are near the end. Even if each paragraph contains ideas of equal importance, make sure the final section shows a culmination of all those ideas.

Examples. What does a well-organized essay look like? Read sample papers in the Writing Center's notebooks. Make outlines of those papers, and observe the way their authors organized the ideas. Observe how articles and textbooks are organized, then remember those techniques for the next time you write an essay.

The next time you're looking for your thesis in an essay like it's a shoe under a pile of laundry, use these tips to organize your way to a great paper! (We can't help you with the dorm room.)

For more information on organization strategies, see
The New St. Martin's Handbook, pages 108-111
http://www.dartmouth.edu/~compose/student/ac_paper/write.html



AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

MCCAIN 6-13
(404) 471-6242