Writing@CSU Writing Guide

Organizing Documents

In our conversations with others, we present our ideas in a logical order. This way, we make sense to our listeners. Typically, we relate events in the order they occurred, so our listeners don't become confused as they follow our ideas. In writing, the pattern we present our ideas in is called organization. Writers need to know about organizational patterns because readers expect what they read to make sense logically.

Choosing an organizational pattern for your writing means knowing what patterns are acceptable for your topic and within your discipline. Some types of organization work better than others, depending on the information you need to convey.

Definition of Organization

Steve Reid, English Department
To me, organization is the arrangement of the larger units of meaning in a paper. That's one of the things that's going to be very different from one course to the next. What are the expected patterns of organization? A lab report is very different from a scientific report, is very different from a poem, is very different from a report in the newspaper. All of these have their own patterns of organization, all of which are acceptable in specific disciplines.

Kate Kiefer, English Department
Organization typically refers to the large elements of text structure. Sometimes these elements are formalized in practice, as in the typical lab report, through

consistent use of headings. Sometimes elements of organization are only informally acknowledged -like the thesis of an academic paper. Most writers across the university would agree, however, that organization refers to the ordering of ideas.

Organization in writing is how ideas are presented. Typically, organization refers to the larger parts of a piece of writing, although it also refers to how paragraphs and sentences are written. The flow of a piece of writing affects how readers interpret ideas. If the organization does not provide readers with the information they are looking for in an orderly manner, they will quickly lose interest. Unorganized writing makes readers search for the information they need.

Types of Organization

Michel Muraski, Journalism and Technical Communication Department
Identifying different organizational patterns is important. For example, if I'm going to do an imperial research report, based on my original research, I would organize the paper based on inductive information where I take a specific observation and end up with a generalization about it. If I'm going to be comparing a choice among options, then I might want to organize my paper by way of comparing and contrasting. Organizational patterns depend on what information needs to be conveyed.

In writing, ideas are conveyed through various methods. Sometimes we discuss the causes of something without ever mentioning its effects. Other times, we present a general idea about a topic before we ever get to the specifics. And still other times, we relate details according to their importance.

Every time you sit down to write, you should rethink what type of organization you'll use. To choose a pattern, consider why you are writing and who will read your writing.What is the most effective way to present this information? The list below represents some common organizational patterns, although many more patterns exist. You should use only one pattern for the overall structure of your writing.

General Organization Patterns

Don Zimmerman, Journalism and Technical Communication Department
Each class in school or company you work for will have certain ways of organizing information. The trick is figuring out what are the accepted ways of organizing. These general patterns depend on what kind of report you're writing, a lab report, a progress report, a memo. Students often have trouble seeing the general pattern. A good way to figure out what the general patterns are is to back up and take a look at trade magazines, and other publications in the field you're writing for. Typically, in much writing, a problem is set up and a couple of examples are provided. Once you've figured out the general pattern, take a look at your content, think about your audience and pull it all together. Merely filling in the blanks on an outline won't give you a good idea of an organizational pattern.

Cause/Effect

Cause and effect are two different concepts. Using one or the other depends on what part of a situation you want to stress. Stating the causes and/or effects of a topic is helpful in persuading readers to make a decision about a topic.

Causes tell readers why something happened. For example, numerous stolen bikes on campus cause students to register their bikes. Smoking causes lung cancer. Typing for many hours causes carpal tunnel.

Effects are the results of something. For example, fifty new bike racks were put on campus with funding from registered bikes. Twelve hundred smokers die every year from lung cancer. Carpal tunnel is now discussed in many employee training programs.

Chronological Order

Chronological order presents ideas according to the time in which they occurred. This type of organization is especially effective if you are describing a process, relaying a series of actions, or telling a story. For instance, to convey the plot of a novel or the procedures of an experiment, you would tell readers what happened first, second, etc.

Comparison

Steve Reid, English Department
The strategies we use for writing have common organizational patterns. If I'm going to define something, what I do is I take a specific case, and I look at the class of objects or things to which it belongs, and then I say, "Here's how it belongs to this class, but here's how it differs from something else." For example, a computer is a writing instrument, so how is it different from a pencil, which is also a writing instrument? Then, within the act of definition, there are organizational patterns.

Comparisons allow you to analyze and evaluate two or more concepts. You can compare two concepts by showing either the differences or the similarities between them. This type of organization is especially effective in showing how one concept is better than another. This way, you can persuade readers to choose one over another. For example, car commercials constantly use comparisons to show us how a specific car gets more mileage than other cars.

When you use comparisons between two or more objects, be sure to compare them on the SAME issues. For instance, to show the differences between a Ford Escort, a GEO Prism, and a Honda Civic, you might examine only passenger space, engine size, and trunk size, depending on what issues will interest your readers the most.

Alternating Organization

An alternating organization stresses the points you wish to make about the concepts you are comparing. An outline of an alternating organization looks like this:

I. Passenger Size
  a. Ford Escort
  b. GEO Prism
  c. Honda Civic
II. Engine Size
  a. Ford Escort
  b. GEO Prism
  c. Honda Civic

III. Trunk Size
  a. Ford Escort
  b. GEO Prism
  c. Honda Civic

Divided Organization

A divided organization stresses the actual concepts you are comparing. An outline of divided organization looks like this:

I. Ford Escort
  a. Passenger Size
  b. Engine Size
  c. Trunk Size
II. GEO Prism
  a. Passenger Size
  b. Engine Size
  c. Trunk Size
III. Honda Civic
  a. Passenger Size
  b. Engine Size
  c. Trunk Size

Emphatic Order

Emphatic order requires you to arrange your ideas according to their importance. Do you want your strongest, most important point to hit the reader immediately or do you want these points to appear near the end? Depending on your topic and your purpose, you should consider what effect these points may have upon your readers. For instance, you might save the strongest point until last, so you can build all your arguments and leave readers with a lasting impression.

General to Specific Order

Kate Kiefer, English Department
Composition folks talk about organization as typical patterns of presenting ideas:

general to specific, specific to general, spatial, hierarchical (most to least important) and so on. Obviously, these patterns can apply both to paragraphs and to larger units of discourse, including several paragraphs in a chunk, a labeled section of a text, or the text as a whole.

With this type of organization, you can either: 1. make a general statement and support that statement with specific examples or 2. provide the reader with specific information and then make a general conclusion. Deciding on which of these two to use depends on why you are writing and what information your audience requires.

How to Organize Your Writing

While the overall organization of your writing helps readers follow your ideas, you should also use organizational strategies. Just as street signs provide directions when you're driving, organizational strategies guide readers through your writing. Writing strategies prepare readers for the organization of your writing. These strategies include using visual clues to guide readers, as well as transitional markers from paragraph to paragraph.

Building Reader Expectations

Building reader expectations helps your readers anticipate the content of your writing. This way, readers are not caught off guard by upcoming details. You can build your readers' expectations by:

- Informing readers of what you are writing about within the first two paragraphs. A specific problem statement or thesis prepares readers for what will follow.
- Telling readers the order in which you will discuss your topic. For example, "In this proposal, I first provide a literature review, followed by my original research."
- Stating three ideas when you say three ideas exist. For example, "Faculty members voiced three opposing arguments."
- Providing a table of contents for longer reports.

Headings and Subheadings

Headings and subheadings visually show readers how your ideas are organized within your text. Each heading should accurately tell readers what each section covers. In addition, bolding and using different font sizes help readers locate the information they need. For some writing, especially scientific reports, it's helpful to number your sections.

Effective Transitions

Transitions alert readers of changes within your writing. By using transitions, your readers are prepared for the flow of your ideas. Effective transitions logically connect paragraphs with one another.

Transitions are used to:

- Introduce an idea:
  First, readers will know this is the first idea.

- Introduce examples:
  For example, this is a transition.

- Indicate a contrast:
  However, be sure your transitions accurately show how ideas relate to one another.

- Prepare readers for more information about the same idea:
  In addition, transitions connect sentences to one another. Words such as "and," "or," "nor," "but," "so," "for," "yet" link sentences together.

- Indicate a conclusion:
  Finally, readers will know this is the last idea.

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