

How to Teach Students to Organize their Essays

Anna Maria Johnson, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, United States

Introduction

Students benefit from explicit instruction about using organization in their essays. Begin a class in essay writing by explaining that our minds are complex, filled with many rich ideas pushing against each other, but our finished essays need to be linear, orderly, a carefully planned journey which readers may follow without confusion. Acknowledge to students that this is a difficult task, but promise them that you will provide many useful and simple strategies to make this job of organizing ideas more manageable.

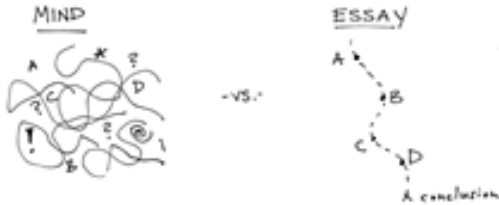
The best approach is to teach students about several different strategies for organizing and then allow them to choose which tool makes most sense to them for a particular assignment. Some students will use several strategies, while others prefer to use just one. Urge students that, regardless of which tools they choose, organization is important at every stage of the writing process—from the early planning stages, throughout the writing process, and even in revision—because it allows the writer to communicate his or her best ideas in the clearest possible way for the reader to understand. The following steps are designed to teach students how to develop their writing process. They can be taught in two or more class periods depending upon your school schedule.

First, Emphasize Why Organization is Important in an Essay

Students may argue that they want to write exactly as the ideas come out of their minds. But teach them that, in truth, a free-form way of writing is often confusing. Before you can teach students to organize their essays, you must help them understand why it is important.

- Remind your students that every journey has a beginning, a middle, and an end. In education, thinking is the journey they must undertake. In academic writing, we call this journey of thought an “essay,” and it starts with an introduction, continues across a set of body paragraphs or sections, and wraps up with a conclusion. As a writer, it is not enough to wander aimlessly on one’s mental journey, delightful as that may be. A responsible writer must also consider her audience, her readers, her travel companions on the mental journey. Teach them that a successful writer will guide her reader from each point to the next, using a comfortable pace, the most pleasant and efficient paths, and giving clear directions about where to turn so as not to become lost. A well-planned essay is like a carefully drawn map for the reader who can follow along with the writer’s thought process, step by sure step. Awkward

passages in an essay are places where a reader could trip and fall, or even become lost, making for a difficult or unsuccessful journey.



Organizing while Planning an Essay

Scope. When students are still in the process of planning their essays, encourage them to think about what kind of scope this particular essay can handle. How many words or pages do they have to work with? How much time? Some ideas are simply too large or unwieldy for a short essay and would require a whole book in order to be developed properly! Guide students in narrowing down their topics to something that is manageable for the parameters of a given assignment.

Once a student of mine wanted to write a research paper about the history of medicine in five different countries, and compare them to one another. This was far too much to handle in one essay! Advise students that it is better to choose one narrow topic and go into as much detail as possible about its strengths and weaknesses in a narrowly focused way.

- Tell students that an essay is like an umbrella; how many people can fit comfortably under one umbrella before some of them start to get wet? A large umbrella can cover about three people, just as a long essay can include 3-4 sub-points under one thesis. A small umbrella, on the other hand, can cover just one person; similarly, a small, one-page essay can only contain one idea or point. Be clear with your students about what size umbrella they have to work with, and how many points can fit under its protection.

Say, “stick to just one idea for this one-page paper,” or “You may choose 3 main ideas for this three-page paper; no more than that!” If feasible, show some images of different size umbrellas and different size animals. How many animals can fit under each umbrella? Tell students to consider the size of the animal (idea) as well as the size of the umbrella (essay length). You can draw some examples on the board as well. Don’t be shy if you are not good at drawing. Even a bad drawing is entertaining and will help students remember the concept!



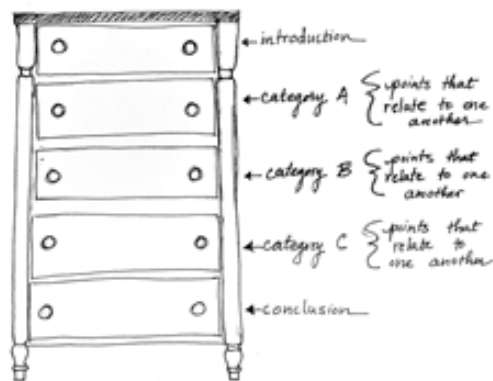
- Students may feel heartbroken when you tell them they must set aside all the wonderful ideas that will not fit into one assignment, so invite them to make a folder or list of ideas waiting for a future essay (an “idea orphanage”) to help them let go (for now) of the brilliant ideas that are beyond the scope of this essay at hand. Then they can focus all their attention on the limited ideas that they can manage well for this assignment.



- Explain that an essay is like a dresser; it has perhaps three or four drawers, and it is usually best to place similar items together in each drawer: socks in this one, dresses in the next, trousers in another. That way one can find one's clothing more quickly. A common American expression is, "A place for everything, and everything in its place." Sketch a simple dresser on the whiteboard and label the drawers with categories. Choose a sample essay topic and model for the students, demonstrating what types of information you plan to store in each drawer. For example, an easy sample topic could be "how to write an essay". Drawers could be labeled "planning," "drafting," and "revising". The planning drawer would contain small ideas like brainstorming, concept mapping, list-making. The drafting drawer would include finding information, narrative, sentence-crafting. The revising drawer would include checking grammar, moving sentences, and adding transition words. This is a similar concept to making an outline, but drawers are easier for students to understand because they are concrete rather than abstract. Think of the drawer sketch as a pre-outline. Explain that each drawer will eventually become a paragraph or a group of

paragraphs (a section) in your model essay.

- Then have the students each draw a simple dresser on their own paper and ask them to label each drawer with different aspects of the essay they plan to write. Advise them to place similar bits of information together in the same "drawer." The bottom drawer is always labeled "conclusion" and the top drawer is always labeled "introduction". The drawers in between constitute the body paragraphs, or main content, of the essay. Once your students have sketched out their dresser and labeled the parts, the next step is to demonstrate how they can convert the dresser sketch into an outline format for their essay.

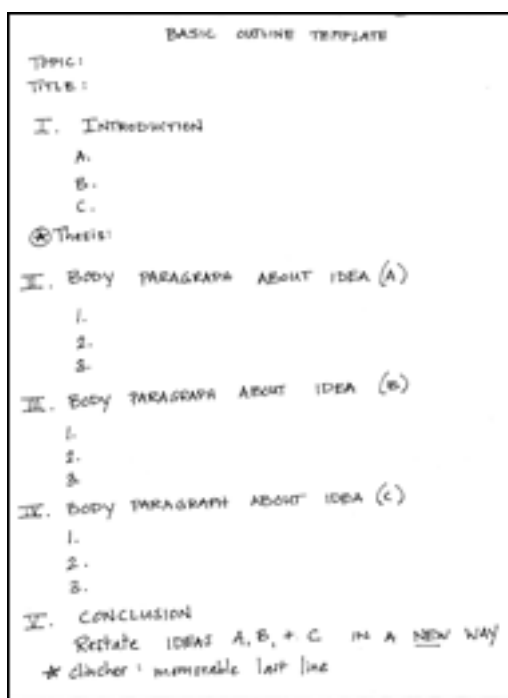


Organizing While Writing the Essay

English speakers tend to be very direct, so tell your students to place the most important concepts up front, at the beginning. This may feel very strange if you are from a culture where it is expected to give several pages of history or back-story before stating one's main point. In English writing, however, readers expect to find the main idea in the introduction, stated clearly in the first paragraph, in what is called a "thesis statement." Explain to your students that without a thesis statement, English readers will not understand the point that is being made

and might not continue reading. Back-story can be filled in later, as needed, perhaps in a paragraph or section called “History of ____” of “Causal Factors,” located early in the paper but after the introduction.

Demonstrate on the whiteboard or chalkboard how to convert the drawer sketch into an outline. I am still grateful to the English teacher I had when I was fourteen years old, Mrs. Korthals. She often wore a yellow polyester suit and her hair in a large, foamy puff around her face. She taught me all the basic skills I would need to know to become a successful writer.



Show students how to make an outline for a five-paragraph essay: a basic structure for a short essay that includes an introduction paragraph, three body paragraphs (one paragraph for each “drawer”), and a conclusion. Once your students have an outline, they will not waste time wondering what to write because it is already planned. They need only to write a few sentences for each point in the outline.

- Explain that the introduction, usually one or two paragraphs, is like a movie preview—it introduces the genre, the mood, the main characters, the setting, and the central conflict, but does not go into great detail. It hints at and sets up what is to come. It prepares the reader for what to expect and lets him or her know why reading the essay will be valuable. Instruct them to write a thesis statement, a sentence that clearly states the main purpose for this essay, and place it last in the introduction (the last sentence of the introductory paragraph).

- A simple recipe for an introduction: 1. Ask them to think of something that will attract the reader’s attention, perhaps a pithy quotation or a set of remarkable statistics, or a very brief anecdote to engage their reader’s interest. 2. Tell them to mention the main topic, any sub-topics that the essay will discuss, and the reason why this topic is important to read about. Have them lay out the argument or discussion with the main components in the order that they will be addressed. (Say: Think of a train schedule—what are the cities en route to the final destination?) 3. Tell them to end the introduction with a clear thesis statement—a main claim or point of view that the writer will support through the remainder of the essay. Some call this an argument.

- The **Body paragraphs** will develop the thesis or argument in detail. Teach students that each paragraph will have a small structure that mirrors the larger structure of the essay: a topic sentence (like a miniature introduction), several detail sentences, and a transition statement (or miniature conclusion). The MEAL plan strategy (adapted from Kennesaw University) works well for organizing each paragraph of the body of the essay. According to this strategy,

M stands for main idea, E stands for evidence (the facts, quotations, or other information related to the main idea of the paragraph), A stands for analysis (the student's own critical thinking about the evidence), and L is for link, or a transition to connect this paragraph to the main idea or to the next paragraph.

- Explain that the last paragraph of the essay is the conclusion and should again name the main ideas (advise students to re-read their introduction and use some of its key words again in the concluding paragraph, but in a new and interesting way). Tell them to not merely restate the same sentences, but gently remind their readers of the journey they have just taken together. Finally, teach them to end their essays with a “clincher”—a final statement that sings, that has “sticking power” to remain in their reader’s mind for a long while, emphasizing the most important nugget of meaning that the student wishes for the reader to take home.

Organizing While Revising

After students write the body of their essays, ask them to revisit the introduction and make sure that all the ideas developed in the essay were briefly mentioned in the beginning and in the same order. Tell them to make sure that the most important words in the essay are named in the introduction. Explain that sometimes students may write their way into their best ideas, discovering them midway through writing the essay. If that has happened to them, the student will need to go back to revise the introduction to reflect the richer, fuller content that evolved since making the first draft of the introduction. Ask them to check that everything mentioned in the introduction was adequately addressed in the body of the essay. If not, tell them they can

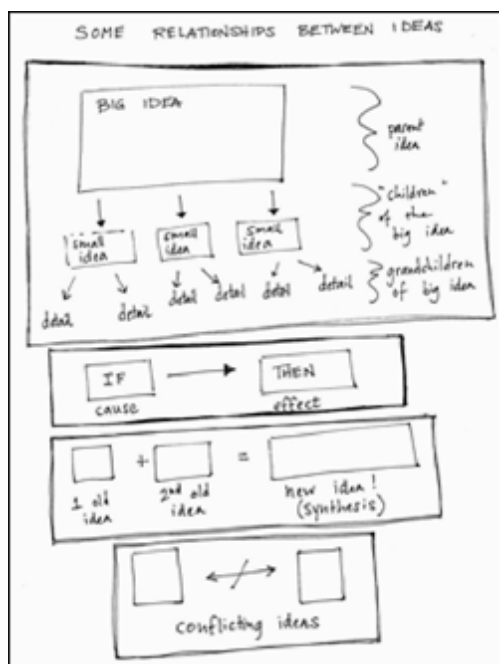
either add in a paragraph about that idea, or subtract the idea from the introduction.

The metaphor of the dresser drawers can be used again in the revision stage; give students different colored pens with which to underline different ideas all throughout their paper. For example, a purple pen could be used to underline sentences about the history or back-story information. A red pen could be used to underline sentences about the present day problem being addressed in the essay. A green pen could indicate possible solutions. Then, have them observe whether any color appears to be out of place (say, a sentence about solutions appears in the “drawer” that is supposed to include history and back-story—the only green sentence in a paragraph of purple), and tell them to consider whether that sentence should be moved to the proper drawer with its companions (i.e. the paragraph about solutions).

Next, teach students to add transition words throughout the essay. Tell them they can use simple words like ordinal numbers (First, second, third, fourth), or pivotal words like “Next”, “therefore,” or “as a result of . . .” Explain that these are like little road signs to alert the reader that he or she is going to take a turn. For ideas that will go further into the same territory, students can use “furthermore” or “moreover” to emphasize them. For ideas that conflict with one another, tell them to use “but” or “in contrast” or “on the other hand.” For small ideas that fall under another larger idea, have them try categorizing phrases: “this can be divided into the following three parts, including . . .” For something that causes another thing, teach them to consider transition phrases like “this leads to . . .” or “Because of ____, the result is ____.”

Ask students to draw a sketch of the relationships between different ideas in order to determine which transition words will be

most appropriate. This is akin to drawing a family tree (“these little ideas are the children of this grown-up idea” or “this idea is equal in power to this other idea, and they are connected in that ___” or “this idea is in conflict with this other idea, but the first is more powerful than the other, according to the evidence”).



Counter-Argument

It is important to acknowledge that there is not necessarily one “right” way to organize an essay, and your students should have the freedom to sort their ideas in the way that makes logical sense to them. There are many good ways to organize an essay, and it is the job of your students to choose a pattern or structure that works best in a given situation.

- A final valuable exercise is to show students a model essay and ask them to identify an alternative structure for the same information. Divide students into small groups of three to discuss the

structures of their own essays and discuss whether a different arrangement might be stronger. While there is not necessarily a right or a wrong structure, there are certainly better or worse ones, and a discussion about that is a good use of class time.

Conclusion

In the United States, most students are familiar with the game of baseball, which involves a runner taking a journey that begins at “home plate”, goes to first base, then second base, then third base, and back to “home”. The end is the same point as the beginning, but arriving back is different because of the rich experience the player earned while running from base to base. An adventure took place, and the player now is richer for it. He knew from the outset where he would go and where he would end—yet the journey around the baseball diamond was where all the exciting plays took place. Similarly, an essay states at the outset where it plans to go, then covers the bases in that order, and finally ends with a conclusion that restates the significance of the three (or so) bases.

Similarly, this essay started as an essay about organization, then covered first base, the planning phase, second base, the writing phase, and third base, the revising phase. Finally, here in the conclusion, we arrive again at home plate, reflecting on the journey and how we have been enriched, developed, and transformed by the exploration of organization in the writing process. As poet T.S. Eliot wrote in the *Four Quartets*, “We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time” (*Four Quartets*, Section V).