Organization with Transitions

A. Organizing your ideas: climactic, spatial, chronological, and logical arrangement

Organization helps writers understand better, and it helps readers understand and remember the message. Organization allows readers to see where the writer plans to take them and to follow a line of reasoning through the body of the essay. Since essays aim not only to inform, but also to argue or persuade, writers need to arrange points to their best advantage and their readers’ understanding. Some ideas have to go before others for the sake of understanding, and this order will dictate an organizational scheme to some extent. Also, some ideas are naturally subordinate to others and will have to occur immediately after the main ideas they go under. So while it is important to understand that an essay’s organization should follow some design, the design is often inherent in the topic. For example, when writing about great nature writers, a research writer might organize points in one of these five ways:

- **By relative importance**: Henry David Thoreau, Loren Eiseley, John Muir, Edward Abbey, Aldo Leopold.
- **From less to more political**: Aldo Leopold, Henry David Thoreau, Loren Eiseley, John Muir, Edward Abbey.
- **By geographical region** each favored (from east to west): Thoreau, Eiseley, Leopold, Abbey, Muir.
- **By chronology**, or date of birth: Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, Eiseley, Abbey.
- **By the effect** each had on the others’ writing style: Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, Eiseley, Abbey.

These examples loosely reflect four basic types of organizational strategies: climactic (order of importance) organization, spatial organization, chronological organization, and logical organization.

1. **Climactic organization**, in which writers save the strongest point for last, giving the reader the sense that the essay is building to a climax, is generally considered to be the weakest of the four. It should be used if the main points of a chosen topic clearly organize themselves this way (see examples 1 and 2 above).

2. **Spatial organization** is common in descriptive essays about objects, places, people, and even taxonomies. Spatial arrangement is useful, along with chronological organization, in describing processes and directing someone from one point to another. Ideas organized this way move through space in whatever direction (from outside to inside, top to bottom, left to right, closest to farthest away) best serves the author’s purpose (see example 3).

3. **Chronological organization** is common in narratives—including biography, fiction, and history—for describing cause-effect relationships among ideas over time. Essay writers may draw upon chronological organization to order their entire essay or to better organize anecdotes, scenes, examples, and other evidence (see example 4).

4. **Logical organization** is best for communicating consequence, entailment, and cause-and-effect sequences (i.e., one must know main point A before one can understand main point B, and one must know the connection between main points A and B before one can understand main point C). Logical organization is useful, perhaps even necessary, in writing a synthesis, since one of the writer’s principal goals may be to show *logically* how diverse subtopics (the Pope, earthquakes, and China, for instance) are not only related but also support the writer’s thesis. Because several causes usually exist for a single effect or several effects from a single cause, this pattern of organization may rely, in part, on the other three organizational strategies (climactic or chronological, for example) for help in ordering the multiple causes or effects.

   Before settling on a particular strategy, the writer should be sure there is not another, more natural way to organize the material.
B. Organizing your ideas: transitions

Transitions act like bridges, creating a smooth flow and reading experience for target readers. Transitions are words, phrases, or passages that link one sentence, paragraph, or main point to the next. Good transitions are often the product of logical organization, and writers facilitate organization by means of transitional cues. Below are three methods of creating transitions.

1. **Numbering paragraphs**: The first, simplest, and ever-effective method of creating transitions is for the writer to number his or her points and refer to them as “first,” “second,” “third,” and so on (as illustrated by this lesson).

2. **Using cue words**: A second way to cue readers to a transition is to use a key word, phrase, or point from the previous paragraph as the springboard for the next paragraph’s topic sentence, thus creating a bridge and showing how the two paragraphs’ main points fit together. The following paragraphs illustrate this effective practice.

   a. **LAST WORD**: The simplest cue uses the last word or phrase of the previous paragraph to launch into a new idea: “The **failing grade** students fear so much may become a reality if fear leads to writer’s block. . . .”

   b. **KEY WORD**: Another cue reaches further back into the paragraph for the key word or phrase: “Their **terror**, alone, may lead straight to writer’s block and the ‘F’ the students dreaded so much. . . .”

   c. **KEY IDEA**: Finally, the writer can compress the entire idea expressed in the previous paragraph into a single phrase, then launch into his or her new idea: “**Anxious writers** are certainly more prone than most to suffer from writer’s block, which may only lead to the ‘F’ they dreaded so much. . . .”

3. **Starting with subordinate clauses**: A third technique begins new paragraphs with subordinating conjunctions, which set up two-part sentences, to bridge ideas. In the two-part sentence structure, the first, subordinate clause contains the main idea from the previous paragraph, and the second, independent clause includes the main idea for the next paragraph. (Subordinate conjunctions include after, although, as, because, before, despite, even though, except, if, since, unless, until, when, where, while.) To use this technique, do the following:

   a. Start the paragraph with an appropriate subordinating conjunction.

   b. Write the main idea from the previous paragraph as the subordinate clause.

   c. Add in a comma at the end of the subordinate clause.

   d. Write the main idea for the next paragraph as the independent clause.

   ✓ Example: “**Although** fear can inspire some writers to do their best work, fear can also lead others to paralysis and failure.”

Three types of transitions—numbering paragraphs, using cue words or phrases, and starting paragraphs with subordinate clauses—help create cohesive flow and give a sense of unity and control to all communication.