



An Introduction to College Writing Tutorial II: Organizing Your Writing

This handout is a companion to the second video tutorial in the Hixon Writing Center's "Introduction to College Writing" series. You can use this handout in a variety of ways: it can serve as a space to take additional notes while watching the video; it can help you refresh your memory of the video; or it can be used as a standalone resource because it closely replicates the video's logic and information. Like the rest of our "Introduction to College Writing" series, this resource will probably be most useful to writers who are new to the demands of college-level academic writing.

WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE TALK ABOUT ORGANIZING A PIECE OF WRITING?

The way you organize a piece of writing determines how your reader will travel through your thought process. Creating logical bridges between your ideas allows your reader to travel through your writing with ease. However, if your writing jumps from topic to topic without providing logical bridges for your reader to follow, your reader is likely to become confused and exasperated.

Some forms of academic writing are very formulaic. For example, an NSF grant proposal must follow a strict structure. However, most kinds of humanistic writing require the writer to develop a structure that fits the project at hand. One of the most common mistakes novice writers in the humanities make when organizing their writing is pressuring themselves to follow a rigid, one-size-fits-all formula. It is much better for you—and, by extension, your reader—if you allow the content of and context for the writing to determine its form.

HOW DOES ORGANIZATION VARY ACROSS DISCIPLINES?

What is considered a logical organization for a lab report is going to be very different from what is considered intuitive for an English paper. So, before you start organizing your ideas, identify what type of paper you are writing. Keep in mind that individual professors may have different sets of expectations for what a given genre of writing entails.

WHY OUTLINE?

Outlining is one of the most common ways writers organize their ideas. It can be as informal or as formal as you like, and it can occur at any point in the writing process.

WHAT ARE MY OUTLINING OPTIONS?¹

- **Informal Outlines:** These are ideal for the early, brainstorming stages of larger projects or for composing shorter, less complicated papers. Informal outlines take a wide range of forms: some people like generating **clusters** to help them group their ideas, while others prefer listing out their ideas and then **linking** them through the use of arrows and/or highlighting.

¹ Want to see some examples of how different types of outlines look? Check out the video tutorial that accompanies this handout.

- **Formal Outlines:** These are best suited to large and/or complex writing projects. There are two basic types of formal outlines: the **topic outline** and the **sentence outline**. While the topic outline is most helpful for working out the basic sequence of your ideas, the sentence outline provides an opportunity for you to more fully flesh out the connections among the topics covered in your paper. Constructing a sentence outline gets you one step closer to drafting and can be especially useful if you're someone who likes to dedicate more time to sentence-level work during the drafting process.

Want to explore academic writing more? The HWC can help! Visit writing.caltech.edu/tutoring for more information about how to set up a meeting with a tutor.