

ORGANIZING THE BODY OF AN ESSAY

The stage between reading and researching and writing an essay or report – planning – is an important one. Planning will help you to make sense of and organize your material and respond fully and directly to your assignment requirements. It will enable you to present your findings, ideas, and arguments in a logical manner that will be accessible to your reader.

General tips for organizing an assignment:

Most pieces of writing will have an introduction and conclusion, but the body may be organized in one of many various ways. **The body of essays should not be confined to only three paragraphs; depending on the essay's length, the body may contain one or more sections, each consisting of one or more paragraphs.** Here are several simple, straightforward ways of organizing the body of a piece of writing:

1. According to the assignment instructions. Sometimes an assignment question will have several parts that seem to follow a logical order. This order of tasks, required sections, or sub-questions may be used to create the sections of your essay.

Sample question: "Choose a good that you have purchased and find out where it comes from. Trace out the commodity chain that has enabled this good to come to you. What are all the processes, places, activities, and people involved in the production of "X"? Consider the social implications of your purchase of "X." How does your purchase contribute to (or detract from) spatial justice in the world?"

The primary tasks in this question suggest that you organize your paper in **two main sections**: the first describes the commodity chain and the second discusses its social implications. Often in an essay or report, description will precede analysis. The first section might then be divided into the places, people, and activities involved in the process of production. The second might be divided into the positive and negative implications for spatial justice in the world.

2. According to the thesis statement. Another way to organize is according to your thesis statement if you are writing an essay. **Each section or paragraph of the body should correspond to a part of the thesis statement and should follow the order established in that statement.**

Sample thesis statement: "The Canadian Charter protects many rights and freedoms of Canadians. However, the exercise of some of these rights and freedoms is undermined by a limited accessibility to both the political process and higher education."

Sample topic sentences for the body sections:

Section A: "The Charter extends democratic and equality rights to its citizens."

Section B: "However, democratic rights are undermined by a limited accessibility to the political process."

Section C: "As well, despite equality rights, many Canadians are disadvantaged by a limited accessibility to higher education."

In an outline, these topic sentences can be arranged at the beginning of the major sections of the body to show the line of reasoning the essay will develop. Subpoints can be added within each section:

C. As well, despite equality rights, many Canadians are disadvantaged by a limited accessibility to higher education.

1. The cost of post-secondary education is now prohibitive to many Canadians.
 - a. average household income across provinces
 - b. average tuition costs for several major programs at colleges and universities
2. The number of grants and scholarships for students has decreased.
 - a. grants
 - b. Scholarships
3. In some areas, secondary school students are not encouraged to pursue higher education or are inadequately informed about their options, both of which limit their ability to access it.
 - a. families not encouraging
 - b. lack of career planning services in some schools

3. According to an assigned or expected format. It may be that you are writing a particular type of essay or report that requires a specific format or pattern of development. For example, you might be writing a comparison/contrast essay using the whole-to-whole or part-to-part format, or you might be writing a research proposal with its common sections: Introduction, Background, and Methods. If you are not given guidelines for an expected format, consult writing in your field or writing handbooks and other resources for direction.

Organizing Principles

If you have no guide or standard format to follow, you can organize ideas and information more easily if you decide on an organizing principle or order of development.

1. **Time or chronological order:** in this method, you show **development through time**, presenting what happened in the order it happened or indicating stages in a process. For example, you may trace a sequence of events in a cause and effect essay. You may describe the stages of development of something through an extended example in an illustration/example essay.
2. **General to specific:** using this order, you can outline the general principles or concepts related to your subject (including definition of key terms) before applying these concepts to specific situations. A variation of this order is arranging from **simplest to most**

complex. You present the most basic information or fundamental ideas first, those that the reader needs to understand before moving on to more complex or specific matters.

Specific to general: you may begin by describing a situation or event, providing a case study, or giving an example before analyzing and deriving general observations or principles from it.

- 3. Order of importance or emphatic order:** the most important and less important ideas, information, or arguments are placed strategically in order to ensure that the reader is informed most effectively or to persuade the reader to accept a position. The most important information in a document might be placed early where the reader is likelier to read it. In a persuasive piece, the **climactic order** might be used to build to a strong ending. You may present and refute the opposing point of view before arguing your own. In a cause/ effect essay, you may build your case to end with what you see as the primary causal factor or effect related to a particular problem.

Essay Modes and Patterns of Development

There are two basic modes for essays: exposition and persuasion. Expository essays explain; they teach, illustrate or clarify a subject for a reader. Persuasive essays argue; they make claims and seek to convince a reader to accept a position or point of view.

In terms of organization, expository essays may present information in various ways. For example, they may classify information or arrange it into categories; they may outline similarities and differences between two subjects; or they may order information in terms of its importance.

Persuasive essays often present reasons in support of a thesis, the central claim of the essay. The reasons should be arranged in the order determined by the introduction and the thesis statement, and they may follow an emphatic order designed to build the case to its strongest point.

Patterns of Development

A pattern of development for a piece of writing may be specified in assignment instructions, or it may be used as a helpful way to approach the subject at hand. Many assignments use a combination of the following common patterns of development:

Illustration/Example

Essays intended to inform readers can illustrate general concepts with specific, concrete examples. Persuasive essays can use examples as evidence to support points or claims.

Cause/Effect

This pattern of development examines the causes that have led to certain results, the reasons why something has happened and the effects of that occurrence. You may want to focus only on the causes of a situation, only on the effects, or both. You may want to highlight what you determine as the primary causes and/or effects of something. Whatever your scope and focus,

be sure to put first things first in the body: examine causes before you explore effects. If you suggest solutions at all, place them at the end of the body or in the conclusion.

Comparison/contrast

In this approach, two or more subjects are examined to determine their differences and similarities. One of two formats is generally used: the whole-to-whole (or subject-by-subject) or the part-to-part (point-by-point). In either format, subjects should be compared according to clearly defined criteria; in the part-to-part format, those criteria (and the comparative element of the assignment) are emphasized as each paragraph examines both subjects in light of one particular criterion. (See the Writing Centre handout at <http://sass.queensu.ca/writingcentre/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2013/06/Compare-Contrast-Essays.pdf> .).

The comparison/contrast approach also organizes points or information according to similarities and differences and may use emphatic order to highlight what is most important about the comparison. For example, if the differences between the subjects are particularly interesting or significant, the similarities should be outlined first before those differences are explored.

Evaluation

A subject is measured by examining it in relation to a given set of criteria. This approach may involve presenting the pros and cons of the subject or describing its strengths and/or weaknesses. You may choose to use an emphatic order (least to most important points) to emphasize either the subject's strengths or its weaknesses.

Classification

In this pattern, a subject is examined by dividing it into categories or subtypes – for example, the types of cancer most often experienced by women. The essay body may be arranged to examine each subtype in turn. Sometimes, you may be asked to determine if something, a poem for example, fits or does not fit a particular category (epic poetry) with its established characteristics. You might first describe the category or subtype and then analyze the subject in light of this description.