

Organizing your Paper

An organized paper presents a clear, orderly argument. Organizing your papers will help you keep your readers' interest, respond fully to the assignment instructions, and demonstrate your scholarly growth to your instructors; it's worth putting time into this aspect of your writing.

Knowing the purpose of your paper can help you choose the best approach to organizing it. The two types of essays have different purposes:

Expository essays organize information in ways that help **teach** or **explain**. 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 present arguments and evidence that support a thesis. The main points should follow an order determined by the introduction and the thesis statement.

How to structure a paper

Your decisions about a paper's organization, structure, and length should be guided by writing conventions in your particular academic field. However, here are some common ways to organize a piece of writing:

According to the assignment instructions

Sometimes an assignment question will have **several parts** that seem to follow a logical order. You can use this order of tasks, required sections, or sub-questions to structure your essay. For example, the following assignment instructions offer a list of tasks:

Choose a good ("X") that you have purchased and find out where it comes from. Trace 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?

This assignment suggests that you organize your paper into **two main sections**:

1. a description of a commodity chain
2. a discussion of its social implications.

Often in an essay or report, **description precedes analysis**. Therefore, 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.

According to an assigned or expected format

You might need to write a **particular type** of essay or report that requires a specific format or pattern of development. Some examples include:

- a [compare / contrast](#) essay using the whole-to-whole or part-to-part format
- a research proposal with conventional sections such as an introduction, background information, and methodology.
- a piece of [scientific writing](#) following the IMRAD structure (Introduction, Method, Results, Analysis, Discussion).

If you are not given guidelines for an expected format, speak to your instructor or supervisor, look at good examples of writing in your field, or book a [writing appointment](#).

Chronological order

In this method, you show **development through time**, presenting what happened in the order it happened, or indicating stages in a process. This structure can work in a cause/effect essay.

General to specific

Outline your topic's general concepts (include definitions of key terms) before applying these concepts to specific situations. A variation: **simplest to most complex**: present the fundamental ideas first, before moving on to the complex nuances.

Specific to general

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.

Strategic order

Place the most important and less important ideas, information, or arguments strategically to inform or persuade the reader most effectively. For example, interesting information at the beginning of a paper might engage your reader quickly. In a persuasive piece, you might build up to a strong ending. You could also present, and then refute, an opposing point of view before arguing your own.

According to the thesis statement

You can also organize your paper according to your [thesis statement](#). In this approach, each section of the body should correspond to a part of the thesis statement and should follow the order of the points you list in that statement. Note that a section might be made up of more than one, even several, paragraphs.

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 limited access to the political process.”

Section C: “In addition, despite equality rights, many Canadians are disadvantaged by limited access to higher education.”

You can arrange these topic sentences at the beginnings of the major sections of the body to **show the line of your reasoning**.

Patterns of essay development

Illustration/Example

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

Cause/Effect

Examine the reasons why something has happened and/or its effects. You might argue that something was a primary cause and/or effect. Be orderly: examine causes before you explore effects, and if you suggest solutions, place them at the end of the body or in the conclusion.

Compare/Contrast

Examine two or more subjects’ differences and similarities, using either the whole-to-whole or the part-to-part [format](#). Use clearly defined criteria.

Evaluation

Examine a topic according to a set of criteria. Present pros and cons of the subject, or describe its strengths and weaknesses.

Classification

Divide a topic into categories to analyze it. You might examine each category in turn, or you might determine if something fits or doesn’t fit a particular category’s characteristics. You might first describe the category and then analyze the subject in light of this description.