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Patterns of Organization

- Chronological Patterns
- Sequential Patterns
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- Topical Patterns

The link between clear, logical organization and effective communication is powerful, both for the "sender" and the "receiver." For the writer, a well organized outline of information serves as a blue print for action. It provides focus and direction as the writer composes the document, which helps to ensure that the stated purpose is fulfilled. For the reader, clear organization greatly enhances the ease with which one can understand and remember the information being presented. People seek out patterns to help make sense of information. When the reader is not able to find a pattern that makes sense, chaos and confusion abound. Effective communication, then, begins with a clearly organized set of ideas following a logical, consistent pattern. Thus, one of the most important decisions a writer makes concerns the pattern of organization that is used to structure and order information.

There are many patterns a writer can use to organize his/her ideas. The specific pattern (or combination of patterns) chosen depends upon the particular topic and the objectives the writer has identified for the document. There is no rule to follow in choosing a pattern of organization; one must simply think carefully about which pattern makes the most sense in helping the reader to better understand and remember the information. There are many different ways of organizing the same information, and often two or more different organizational patterns are combined to create a final outline of information.

The most commonly used patterns of organization are described below.

Chronological Patterns

A chronological pattern of organization arranges information according to a progression of time, either forward or backward. When a topic is best understood in terms of different segments of time, a chronological format works well. For example, topics of an historical nature are best organized using this pattern.

When using a chronological pattern, each main section of information represents a particular period of time, and the sub-points contained within each main section refer to significant events that occurred within that time frame. A variation of this organizational pattern involves dividing a topic into "past-present-future" or" before-during-after" segments.

For example, suppose a writer's stated purpose is to describe the historical development and evolution of the city of Seattle. Assuming that Seattle is 100 years old, the writer could organize the information by grouping it into four 25-year chunks. In this case, the sub-points within each main section of time represent the most significant events that occurred during that particular time frame. Notice that by breaking the 100 year span into distinct 25 year chunks, the writer can create an outline that follows the guidelines of outlining described under "Principles of Organizing." This outline contains four mutually exclusive and balanced sections of information.

Chronological Pattern Example

I. 1895 - 1920

1. Significant Event # 1
2. Significant Event # 2

II. 1920 - 1945

3. Significant Event # 1
4. Significant Event # 2

III. 1945 - 1970

5. Significant Event # 1
6. Significant Event # 2

IV. 1970 - 1995

7. Significant Event # 1
8. Significant Event # 2

Sequential Patterns

A sequential pattern of organization is similar to a chronological pattern, but arranges information according to a step-by-step sequence that describes a particular process. Using a sequential pattern, each main section of information represents a main step that one would follow in the actual process. The points included within each main section represent the sub-steps one would follow. When one wishes to describe a process that follows a specific series of steps in a particular order, then, a sequential pattern works well.

For example, suppose a writer's stated purpose is to explain how wine is made. A sequential pattern would be effective in this case because it breaks the process down into a specific series of steps which should be followed in a precise order. Notice that a series of related smaller steps are grouped into one larger category. Thus, a process which

involves many specific steps can be simplified by highlighting the most fundamental steps, which helps the reader understand the process and remember its key parts.

Sequential Pattern Example

I. Step One: Harvest the grapes

9. Harvesting procedure number one
10. Harvesting procedure number two

II. Step Two: Prepare the grapes

11. Preparation procedure number one
12. Preparation procedure number two

III. Step Three: Ferment the grapes

13. Fermenting procedure number one
14. Fermenting procedure number two

IV. Step Four: Press the grapes

15. Pressing procedure number one
16. Pressing procedure number two

V. Step Five: Age the wine

1. Aging procedure number one
2. Aging procedure number two

Spatial Patterns

A spatial pattern of organization arranges information according to how things fit together in physical space; i.e., where one thing exists in relation to another. This pattern works well when a writer wishes to create a mental picture of something which has various parts distinguished by physical location. Topics involving geography, for example, are often best organized using a spatial pattern.

For example, suppose a writer wished to describe the forms of entertainment available to tourists visiting Seattle. He/she could arrange the information according to "things to do" in the different districts or geographic locations of the city. Notice how this pattern of organization aids the reader. It makes sense for the writer to organize the information by physical location because the information is easy to understand and use in this format, particularly for tourists who are not familiar with the area.

Spatial Pattern Example

I. Downtown Waterfront

3. Aquarium
4. Pike Place Market

II. Seattle Center

5. Space Needle
6. Pacific Science Center

III. University District

7. University of Washington campus
8. The "Ave" (shops on University Avenue)

Compare-Contrast Patterns

A compare and contrast pattern arranges information according to how two or more things are similar to or different from one another (or both). This is an effective pattern to use when the reader can better understand one subject when it is described in relation to another. If the reader is familiar with one topic, the writer can compare or contrast it with another topic to shed insight on it.

For example, suppose a writer's stated purpose is to help the reader make an informed decision about whether to attend a two-year college or a four-year university. One way to arrange the information is to compare and contrast the two educational options along several important dimensions, such as cost, quality of education, and variety of educational programs. In this case, the number of main sections in the outline would depend on how many dimensions or factors were considered (three in the case below). Another way to arrange the information would be to create two main sections, one that describes similarities and one that describes differences (as shown in example # 2). Notice that either format could be equally effective.

Compare and Contrast Pattern Example One

I. Cost of Tuition

9. Two-year
10. Four-year

II. Quality of Education

1. Two-year

2. Four-year

III. Educational Programs

3. Two-year
4. Four-year

Compare and Contrast Pattern Example Two

I. Points of Comparison

5. Educational Programs
6. Cost of Tuition

II. Points of Contrast

7. Quality of Education
8. Type of Degree

Advantages-Disadvantages Patterns

This pattern organizes information about a topic by dividing it up into its "good" and "bad" parts, or pro's and con's. It is effective to use when a writer wishes to objectively discuss both sides of an issue without taking a persuasive stance. This allows the reader to weigh both sides of an issue. As with the compare-contrast pattern, there are a number of possible variations to an advantages-disadvantages pattern. The simplest form of this pattern is shown below.

Suppose, for example, that a writer's stated purpose is to describe the advantages and disadvantages of attending a two-year college. One way to arrange the information is to divide it into two main sections, one for the advantages and one for the disadvantages. In this scenario, the information contained within each main section will represent the specific topics of analysis (cost, accessibility, etc).

Advantages and Disadvantages Example

I. Advantages

9. Cost
10. Accessibility

II. Disadvantages

11. Number of educational programs
12. Quality of instruction

Cause-Effect Patterns

This pattern is used to show the different causes and effects of various conditions. This pattern is particularly effective when writing a persuasive document in which the writer advocates some action to solve a problem, because it demonstrates important relationships between variables. There are two major variations to this pattern; (a) dividing the outline into two major sections comprised of causes and effects; or (b) dividing the outline according to the different causes, with the effects of each cause contained within the larger "causes" section. See the examples below.

Suppose a writer's stated purpose is to explain the causes of conflict escalation and their effects. He/she could organize the information in one of the following two ways. Again, notice that either method could work equally well.

Cause and Effect Pattern Example One

I. Causes of Conflict Escalation

13. Expanding the issues
14. Personal attacks

II. Effects of these causes

15. Lose focus on original issue
16. Cycle of defensive responses
17. Win-Lose orientation
18. Negative emotions

Cause and Effect Pattern Example Two

I. Cause: Expanding the issues

19. Effect: Lose focus on original issues
20. Effect: Cycle of defensive responses

II. Cause: Personal attacks

21. Effect: Negative emotions
22. Effect: Win-Lose orientation

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Problem-Solution Patterns

A problem-solution pattern divides information into two main sections, one that describes a problem and one that describes a solution. This pattern is typically used in persuasive writing, where the writer's general purpose is to convince the reader to support a certain course of action. The pattern is designed to compel the reader to make some kind of change in opinion or behavior by establishing that a problem exists, then providing a solution. In the problem section, the writer identifies different aspects of the problem being discussed and offers evidence of these problems. In the solution section, the writer identifies a potential solution and supports the effectiveness of this solution over others.

For example, suppose a writer's stated purpose is to persuade his/her readers to ride bicycles as their primary form of transportation. First the writer will attempt to establish that common forms of motorized transportation create compelling problems that require a solution. Then he/she will show how the proposed solution - riding bikes - provides a beneficial alternative to driving.

Problem-Solution Example

I. Problem: Motorized Transportation

23. Increasing traffic congestion
24. Increasing pollution
25. Increasing "road rage" from traffic-related stress

II. Solution: Riding Bicycles

26. Bike riding reduces the number of motorized vehicles in use
27. Bike riding is not a source of pollution
28. Bike riding has physical and psychological health benefits

Topical Pattern

This pattern is the most commonly used format, and will typically work when the other patterns do not. A topical pattern arranges information according to different sub-topics within a larger topic, or the "types" of things that fall within a larger category. Using this pattern, each "type" represents a main section of information.

For example, suppose a writer wished to describe various types of wine. One way to outline this information would be to divide the type of wine by its color, as shown in example one. A second way would be to divide the

types of wine by the region in which they were made, as shown in example two.

Topical Pattern Example One

I. Red Wines

A. European

29. Bordeaux
30. Burgundy
31. Chianti

B. Californian

32. Cabernet Sauvignon
33. Pinot Noir
34. Zinfandel

II. White Wines

A. European

35. Bordeaux
36. Burgundy
37. Mosel

B. Californian

38. Sauvignon Blanc
39. Chardonnay
40. Riesling

Topical Pattern Example Two

I. European Wines

Red

41. ___
42. ___
43. ___

White

1. ___

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2. ___
3. ___

II. Californian Wines

Red

4. ___
5. ___
6. ___

White

1. ___
2. ___
3. ____