

How to Organize a Paper

Whether writing a paragraph or a ten-page paper, the structure is crucial. When a paper is effectively organized, it allows readers to follow the author's arguments and ideas. Depending on the type of paper, the design strategy will differ. This handout provides a few general questions to aid in structuring a paper, and it includes an example of an essay outline as well as an outline template.

1. What information does the audience need?

The purpose of a paper will likely influence what type of information the audience will need to know. Some information the paper may need to include are background information, examples, opposing viewpoints, rebuttals, facts, and statistics. For example, if you are writing about hip-hop and social justice, the audience might first need to know about the social conditions of the South Bronx, where hip-hop originated, in order to understand the connection between hip-hop and social justice.

2. In what order should the paper's information be organized?

Another consideration for paper organization is the sequence in which the information is presented. For an argument paper, writers may want to start with their strongest argument, place their weaker arguments in the middle, and end with their second strongest argument. However, they could also organize the information from strongest to weakest or weakest to strongest. Other ways a paper could be organized are as follows:

- Chronological – starting at the beginning of a time sequence and going in order of events
- Sequential – explaining something step-by-step
- Cause and Effect – focusing first on the cause of an event or occurrence and then moving to the effect of that event/occurrence
- Problem-Solution – fully explaining the problem before examining the solution

3. Do the paragraphs flow smoothly and logically from one idea to the next?

When organizing a paper, it is important to ensure that the ideas are cohesive together and share a logical relationship. For instance, it would probably be confusing to a reader if a paper about dyslexia described the challenges of dyslexia in the first body paragraph, then listed famous people with dyslexia in the next, and defined dyslexia in the final body paragraph. The first issue with this organization is that there does not seem to be much of a logical relationship between the challenges of having dyslexia and famous people with dyslexia, so putting these two paragraphs together causes the paper to be unfocused and confusing. Additionally, a reader might not know what dyslexia is, so defining it in the last body paragraph will likely prevent the reader from understanding the information in the previous paragraphs.

The paper would flow more logically by defining dyslexia in the first body paragraph, describing the challenges in the next, and exploring strategies for coping with dyslexia in the last paragraph. Each of these paragraphs have a logical relationship with the previous and flow smoothly from one to the next.

4. Does the organization support the argument and ideas in the paper's thesis?

Finally, and most importantly, a paper's organization should support the thesis. When organizing a paper, writers should ask themselves, "Which organizational arrangement makes the most sense and is the most convincing to my audience?" If the background information provided is unclear or the organization of the paper is not logical, the audience will likely become confused. Therefore, it is important to plan the paper's main points early in the drafting process to ensure the clarity of your argument.

Some people find an outline helpful when organizing a paper. An outline is a numbered and/or lettered list that maps out the paragraphs and main points of a paper. It can be very detailed with written sentences or merely a list of points in the order you want to write them. Take a look at the following outline to see how the organization can support a paper's thesis.

Example Outline for Compare and Contrast Paper

1. Introduction

- A. Hook: In the years leading up to the Civil War, many Northerners believed that slaves in the South were content to be slaves and were even happy to serve their masters.
- B. Background Information: Fugitive Slave Law, Harriet Jacobs, and Frederick Douglass
 - Main Point 1: Slavery experience
 - Main Point 2: Becoming literate
 - Main Point 3: Slave narratives
- C. Thesis: Although Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass experienced slavery differently, they both wrote groundbreaking slave narratives that exposed the inhumanity of slavery, causing many to question that peculiar institution.

Thesis Argument



These points support the argument in the thesis. The body paragraphs will follow the same order.

2. Slavery experience

- A. Harriet Jacobs
- B. Frederick Douglass

3. Becoming literate

- A. Harriet Jacobs
- B. Frederick Douglass

4. Slave narratives

- A. Harriet Jacobs
- B. Frederick Douglass

5. Conclusion

- A. Rephrased thesis: Despite some difference in their life stories, both Jacobs and Douglass were instrumental in exposing the cruelty of slavery.
- B. Summary of body paragraphs:
 - 1. Slavery experience
 - 2. Becoming literate
 - 3. Slave narrative
- C. So What: Jacobs' and Douglass' narratives exposed slavery as a dehumanizing institution and called upon Northerners to action.

The conclusion follows the paper's organization by summarizing the body paragraphs in the order they occur in the paper.

Outline Template

I. Introduction

A. Hook: _____

B. Background Information/Context:

Main Point 1: _____

Main Point 2: _____

Main Point 3: _____

C. Thesis: _____

II. Main Point 1: _____

a. _____

b. _____

c. Transition: _____

III. Main Point 2: _____

a. _____

b. _____

c. Transition: _____

IV. Main Point 3: _____

a. _____

b. _____

c. Transition: _____

V. Conclusion

A. Rephrased Thesis: _____

B. Summary of Body Paragraphs

Main Point 1: _____

Main Point 2: _____

Main Point 3: _____

C. So What? Now What? _____

Additional Resources

For further help organizing a paper, visit the Academic Center for Excellence's walk-in Writing Center, schedule an appointment with a tutor, or visit our website at <https://www.germannna.edu/academic-center-for-excellence/>. You can also refer to following handouts: [Brainstorming with Venn Diagrams](#), [Creating a Thesis Statement](#), [Guide to Writing an Essay](#), and [Introductions and Conclusions](#).