

# organization

Clear organization helps your ideas flow logically and increases the overall readability of your writing. The handout will help you create an organization that is appropriate for your work.

## Important Concepts

### Reader-focused Writers

When confronted with the claim that their paper is confusing or doesn't flow, many beginning writers say, "But it made sense in *my* head." This attitude is an indicator of being a writer-focused writer, meaning that you only write to satisfy your own needs. Being a **reader-focused writer** means that you make sure that others can navigate your ideas. You want your ideas to make sense in *their* heads. To do so, you will have to deliberately organize your ideas.

### The Relationships Between Ideas

Your writing will contain ideas of all kinds: claims, reasons, evidence, assumptions, etc. However, you will rarely present one idea by itself. Instead, you will present multiple inter-connected ideas (e.g., a claim supported by reasons and evidence). A clear organization shows your reader how these ideas relate to each other. Is A an example of B? Did X happen after Y?

Consider how the ideas in the following sentences relate to each other:

1. The original *Star Wars* is a mishmash of classic film genres.
2. The scenes on the desert planet Tatooine draw on the imagery of John Ford westerns.
3. Obi-wan Kenobi and Darth Vader are essentially samurai warriors lifted straight from an Akira Kurosawa film.
4. The space battles were created to mirror footage from WWII dogfights.
5. Perhaps this blending is why the film is so effective—it reminds everyone of something.

*Note:* Sentence 1 makes a claim about *Star Wars*. Sentences 2–4 present specific examples as evidence of the claim made in Sentence 1. Sentence 5 explains why the claim made in Sentence 1 (which has now been supported by evidence) is significant.

Now consider what happens when sentences don't clearly relate to each other:

1. While the original *Star Wars* trilogy has strongly defined characters, the prequel trilogy is filled with bland cardboard cut-outs.
2. For example, original trilogy characters like Luke Skywalker and Han Solo go through relatable transformations over the course of the films.

3. *The Clone Wars* animated series also has interesting characters such as Ahsoka Tano.
4. The animation quality in *The Clone Wars* is superior to that of the new animated series, *Rebels*.
5. The CGI in the prequel trilogy drew attention away from the core characters.

*Note:* This set of sentences is a bit trickier since all of the sentences discuss some aspect of the *Star Wars* franchise. Sentence 1 makes a claim about the characters in two *Star Wars* trilogies. Sentence 2 provides evidence for that claim. However the ideas become less related in Sentence 3, which makes a claim about characters in a series not mentioned in Sentence 1. Sentence 4 is even more unrelated, making a claim about the animation of the series mentioned in the previous sentence. Finally, Sentence 5 makes a claim that is only partially related to the initial discussion outlined in Sentence 1.

## Creating and Fulfilling Expectations

Imagine that you're planning a trip and find a website for an amazing hotel—it's beautiful, it's clean, and it's affordable. You book your stay, but when you arrive, the hotel is nothing like what you saw on the website—it's ugly, it's dirty, and it's overpriced. You had an expectation, and it was not fulfilled.

Effective organization works in the same way: It creates an expectation and fulfills it. Expectations are created within sections, paragraphs, and sentences. Consider the following topic sentence:

**Example:** While Luke Skywalker is clearly the hero of the saga, he is ultimately not as interesting or engaging as Han Solo.

*Note:* From this topic sentence, we can expect that the rest of the paragraph will explain why Han Solo is more interesting than Luke Skywalker. If it doesn't, our expectation will be left unfulfilled.

Scientific writing does not function on suspense, meaning that expectations are almost always immediately fulfilled. If you leave too many expectations unmet, your readers will become confused and upset.

## When to Organize

### Before You Write

It is usually easiest to organize your document before you start writing. As you brainstorm, think of the relationship between the ideas you generate. Then, use these relationships to create an outline (see below).

### While You Write

As you write, make sure that you use strong topic sentences to introduce the main idea of the paragraph to the reader. Make sure paragraphs contain a clear central idea. Also, pay attention to the ways that your sentences fit together.

### After You Write

Organizing doesn't end once you've finished your initial draft. As you revise and edit, you may find a paragraph or two that seem out of place. By creating a reverse outline, you can determine where these pieces belong (see below).

## What to Organize

As you organize, move from big to small. Start with sections and work your way down to sentences.



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## Sections

The most basic form of organization has three major sections: a beginning, a middle, and an end. These general sections take on specific forms in different genres. For example, in a journal article using the IMRAD format (i.e., **introduction, methods, results, and discussion**), the beginning will be the introduction, the middle will be the "Methods" and "Results" sections, and the end will be the "Discussion" section.

Generally, the **beginning** provides your readers with context for the main points of your paper. Start with information that your audience knows, and then work towards the unknown.

*Note:* For more information on introductions, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

The **middle** often presents challenges for writers since it can take a variety of forms. If you aren't writing in a proscribed format such as IMRAD, experiment with the patterns of organization presented later in this handout.

The **end** quickly summarizes your main points and then places them back into a larger context.

*Note:* For more information on conclusions, please see our "Discussion" [handout](#).

## Paragraphs

A paragraph is a unit of thought, and beginning a new one signals to your reader that you are moving on to a new idea. When organizing paragraphs within a section, make sure that the ideas clearly relate to each other.

In academic writing, most paragraphs tend to be **point-first paragraphs**, meaning that they begin with a topic sentence which clearly announces the point of the paragraph. This allows the reader to quickly see how a new paragraph relates to previous material.

**Example:** Han Solo undergoes a major transformation over the course of the first two original Star Wars films. When we first meet him, Han is a dangerous rogue who...

*Note:* This topic sentence clearly announces the central idea of the paragraph.

Slightly less common are **point-last paragraphs**. These paragraphs delay the main idea until the end of the paragraph. Instead, they begin with something else (usually a question) that creates an expectation for the paragraph.

**Example:** Why is Han Solo such a popular character? When we first encounter Han in the original *Star Wars*, he's intensely unlikable: he's selfish, arrogant, and violent. By all accounts, we shouldn't like Han—we should like Luke Skywalker (ostensibly the hero of the saga), who has none of these qualities. But as the story progresses, we see Han turn outward, accept responsibility, and risk his life for others. Han isn't a good person when we meet him, but we see him become one. Witnessing this transformation is what makes Han so engaging and likable—and ultimately more like us.

*Note:* In this point-last paragraph, the question in the first sentence creates an expectation that is fulfilled in the last sentence.

*Note:* For more information on forming paragraphs, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

## Sentences

Within paragraphs, sentences should connect with each other. This principle is called cohesion, which can be achieved through a variety of means:

**Transition Words and Phrases:** When we **first** meet Han Solo, he's intensely unlikable. **But later** in the story, we see Han grow into a more sympathetic character.

**Demonstratives:** We see Han turn outward, accept responsibility, and risk his life for others. Witnessing **this** transformation is what makes Han so engaging and likable.

**Articles:** After the death of Obi-Wan Kenobi, Luke begins his search for **a** new mentor. **The** mentor he finds is nothing like he expects.

**Repetition of Key Terms:** Luke Skywalker is **heroic**, but he is also a little boring. Han Solo is not a **hero** in the traditional sense: his actions are motivated more by self-interest than by **heroism**.

**Something Old, Something New (Old Info/New Info):** We first encounter Han Solo in **a seedy cantina**. **The cantina** is literally **a meeting place for creatures from other worlds**. As an creature of this **transitional space**, **Han** is perfectly situated **to guide Luke Skywalker from one world to another, both literally and symbolically**.

*Note:* For more information on transitions, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

## How to Organize

### Outline

Outlines are the most common organizational tool. Since an outline is a list of your paper's main points, it allows you to quickly assess the logical flow of your work.

As you create an outline, keep two concepts in mind: **subordination** and **coordination**.

When you **subordinate**, you move from general to specific. In an outline, this is accomplished by using sections and subsections. Each new subsection is subordinate to an item higher on the hierarchy of the outline. Items on the same level of the hierarchy are considered **coordinated**. Coordinated items usually have the same function with their section or subsection (e.g., multiple examples, items in a comparison, etc.).

**Example:** I. The original Star Wars trilogy has stronger characters than the prequel trilogy.

- A. Strong original trilogy characters
  - 1. Luke Skywalker
  - 2. Han Solo
  - 3. Princess Leia
- B. Weak prequel trilogy characters
  - 1. Anakin Skywalker
  - 2. Obi-wan Kenobi
  - 3. Padmé Amidala

*Note:* In this outline, subsections A and B are subordinate to the claim made in Roman numeral I. Subsections 1, 2, and 3 are subordinated to either A or B. Additionally, sections A and B are coordinated with each other, meaning that they both have equal weight in the hierarchy. Likewise, points 1, 2, and 3 in each subsection are coordinated with each other.

### Reverse Outline

When you create a reverse outline, you work backwards from your paper to create a bare-boned list of your ideas. This works well if you are the sort of writer who writes best by dumping your thoughts

out on the page.

To create a reverse outline, read through what you have written and write a brief summary of each paragraph in the margin. Pay special attention to paragraphs that contain multiple ideas—you may want to move those ideas later. Then use the summaries of each paragraph to form an outline like the one previously discussed. As with a regular outline, be sure to indicate both the subordination and the coordination of ideas.

*Star Wars pulls from many genres.*

The original *Star Wars* is a mishmash of classic film genres. The scenes on the desert planet Tatooine draw on the imagery of John Ford westerns. Obi-wan Kenobi and Darth Vader are essentially samurai warriors lifted straight from an Akira Kurosawa film. The space battles were created to mirror footage from WWII dogfights. Perhaps this blending is why the film is so effective—it reminds everyone of something.

Figure 1: Reverse Outlining

## Storyboard

If you are visually inclined, you can also develop your organization through storyboarding. There are a few ways to storyboard. One option is using sticky notes. Write each idea on its own note. Then, organize these notes on sheets of paper. Finally, put the sheets in an order that makes sense for your audience. If your ideas don't flow, move sticky notes to other sheets or reorder them.

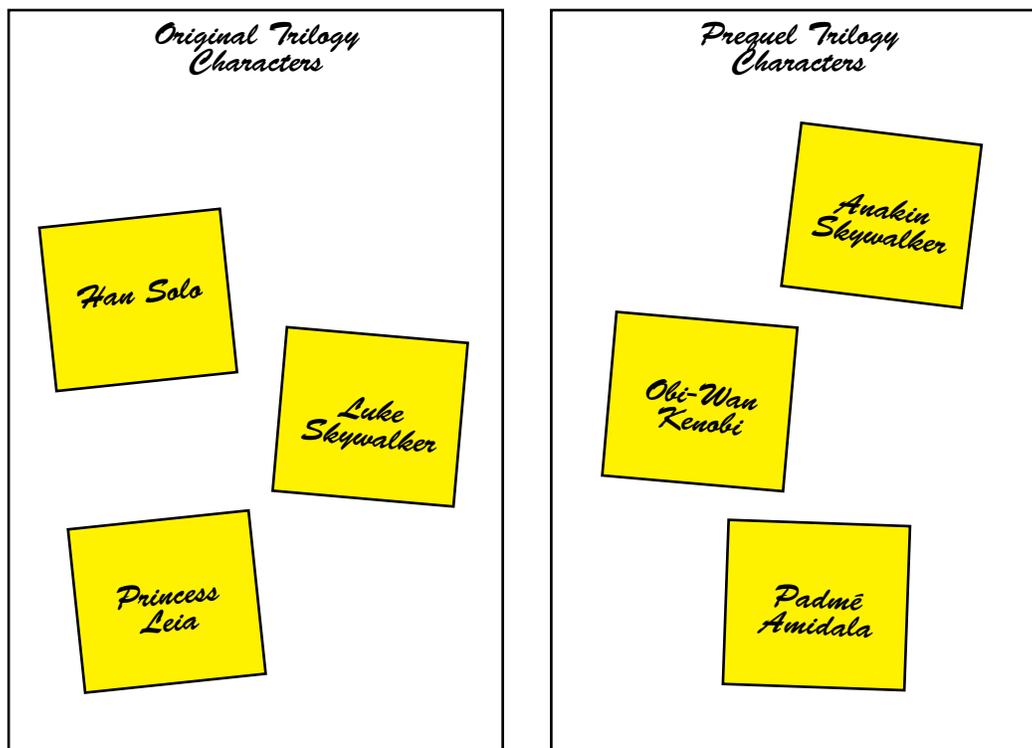


Figure 2: Storyboarding

You can also use presentation software like Microsoft PowerPoint to storyboard.

## Patterns of Organization

Remember, information can be arranged in a variety of ways depending on what is most important for you and your readers.

## Comparison and Contrast

There are two patterns for comparing and contrasting. Before you organize, you will need to know the **items** you are comparing and your **criteria** for comparison. Then, you can either subordinate the criteria to the items or the items to the criteria.

Whichever pattern you choose, be consistent.

Two Organizational Strategies for Comparison and Contrast	
Pattern	Example
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Item I               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Criterion A</li> <li>b. Criterion B</li> <li>c. Criterion C</li> </ul> </li> <li>II. Item II               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Criterion A</li> <li>b. Criterion B</li> <li>c. Criterion C</li> </ul> </li> <li>III. Item III               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Criterion A</li> <li>b. Criterion B</li> <li>c. Criterion C</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Apples               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Size</li> <li>b. Shape</li> <li>c. Color</li> </ul> </li> <li>II. Oranges               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Size</li> <li>b. Shape</li> <li>c. Color</li> </ul> </li> <li>III. Pears               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Size</li> <li>b. Shape</li> <li>c. Color</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Criterion A               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Item I</li> <li>b. Item II</li> <li>c. Item III</li> </ul> </li> <li>II. Criterion B               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Item I</li> <li>b. Item II</li> <li>c. Item III</li> </ul> </li> <li>III. Criterion C               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Item I</li> <li>b. Item II</li> <li>c. Item III</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Size               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Apples</li> <li>b. Oranges</li> <li>c. Pears</li> </ul> </li> <li>II. Shape               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Apples</li> <li>b. Oranges</li> <li>c. Pears</li> </ul> </li> <li>III. Color               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Apples</li> <li>b. Oranges</li> <li>c. Pears</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## Time

If time plays an important role in your topic and argument, arrange your information chronologically.

Organizational Strategy for Time	
Pattern	Example
I. Time Period I a. Event A b. Event B c. Event C	I. 1800–1900 a. 1889: Hull House established b. 1898: First social work course offered at Columbia University
II. Time Period II a. Event D b. Event E c. Event F	II. 1900–2000 a. 1937: Master’s degree program is required for social work accreditation b. 1955: National Association of Social Workers (NASW) established
III. Time Period III a. Event G b. Event H c. Event I	III. 2000–Present a. 2001: NASW Foundation established b. 2010: Congressional Social Work Caucus established

## Space

You can also arrange your information spatially. This pattern is often used to compare locations.

Organizational Strategy for Space	
Pattern	Example
I. Place I a. Feature A b. Feature B c. Feature C	I. Inner Harbor a. Things to do b. Places to eat c. Places to stay
II. Place II a. Feature A b. Feature B c. Feature C	II. Federal Hill a. Things to do b. Places to eat c. Places to stay
III. Place III a. Feature A b. Feature B c. Feature C	III. Fells Point a. Things to do b. Places to eat c. Places to stay

## Importance

When presenting examples, determine their effectiveness (i.e., this one is good, this one is better, this one is best) and then present them in the order of better, good, best. This sandwiches your weakest example between two stronger ones.

Organizational Strategy for Importance (Sandwiching)	
Template	Example
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>I. Claim<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Better Example</li><li>b. Good Example</li><li>c. Best Example</li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>I. Popular Green Characters<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Kermit the Frog</li><li>b. The Incredible Hulk</li><li>c. Yoda</li></ul></li></ul>

Another approach is to rank items. Countdowns work on this principle. However, since academic writing doesn't function on suspense (like a top-ten countdown), it's usually best to explain your ordering before presenting your list.

Organizational Strategy for Importance (Ranking)	
Template	Example
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>I. Item #1<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Reason A</li><li>b. Reason B</li></ul></li><li>II. Item #2<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Reason C</li><li>b. Reason D</li></ul></li><li>III. Item #3<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Reason E</li><li>b. Reason F</li></ul></li><li>IV. Item #4<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Reason G</li><li>b. Reason H</li></ul></li><li>V. Item #5<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Reason I</li><li>b. Reason J</li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>I. Worst Food #1: Soda<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. High Sugar Content</li><li>b. Artificial Flavors</li></ul></li><li>II. Worst Food #2: Processed Meat<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. High Salt Content</li><li>b. Link to Heart Disease and Cancer</li></ul></li><li>III. Worst Food #3: Donuts<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. High Sugar Content</li><li>b. Preservatives</li></ul></li><li>IV. Worst Food #4: Breakfast Cereal<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. High Sugar Content</li><li>b. Artificial Colors</li></ul></li><li>V. Worst Food #5: Potato Chips<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. High Trans Fat Content</li><li>b. Hydrogenated Oils</li></ul></li></ul>

## Pros and Cons

When listing pros and cons, you have two choices. If you are discussing only one option or issue, simply group your paragraphs into two sections: pros and cons. If you are discussing multiple options, it is usually more clear to base your organization around the options themselves with subsections for pros and cons.

Organizational Strategy for Pros and Cons	
Pattern	Example
I. Pros a. Pros A b. Pros B c. Pros C  II. Cons a. Cons A b. Cons B c. Cons C	I. Pros: Organic Food a. No pesticides b. More nutrients c. No GMOs  II. Cons: Organic Food a. Higher price b. Limited access c. Lower crop yields
I. Option I a. Pros b. Cons  II. Option II a. Pros b. Cons  III. Option III a. Pros b. Cons	I. No Pesticides a. Pro: No toxins on food b. Con: Crops susceptible to pests  II. No GMOs a. Pro: Only "natural" food b. Con: Lower crop yields  III. Higher Price a. Pro: More money for local farmers b. Con: Not affordable for all

## Cause and Effect

The difference between the following two patterns for cause and effect is one of emphasis. If you are focusing on the causes of a problem, subordinate the effects. If you're focusing on the effects or impact of a problem, subordinate the causes.

Organizational Strategy for Cause and Effect	
Template	Example
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Cause I               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Effect A</li> <li>b. Effect B</li> </ul> </li> <li>II. Cause II               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Effect C</li> <li>b. Effect D</li> </ul> </li> <li>III. Cause III               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Effect E</li> <li>b. Effect F</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Cause of Addiction: Genetics               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Effect: Increased tolerance to substances</li> <li>b. Effect: Increased likelihood to use substances</li> </ul> </li> <li>II. Cause of Addiction: Environment               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Effect: Acceptance of substance abuse</li> <li>b. Effect: Lack of resources to quit substance use</li> </ul> </li> <li>III. Cause of Addiction:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Effect:</li> <li>b. Effect:</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Cause I               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Effect A</li> <li>b. Effect B</li> </ul> </li> <li>II. Cause II               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Effect C</li> <li>b. Effect D</li> </ul> </li> <li>III. Cause III               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Effect E</li> <li>b. Effect F</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Effect of Smoking: Skin Damage               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Smoke depletes nutrients</li> <li>b. Smoke reduces blood flow to skin</li> </ul> </li> <li>II. Effect of Smoking: Tooth Damage               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Smoke stains teeth</li> <li>b. Smoke increases chance of gum disease and tooth loss</li> </ul> </li> <li>III. Effect of Smoking: Lung Cancer               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Smoke weakens immune system</li> <li>b. Smoke damages cells' DNA</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## Problem and Solution

When dealing with general problems and solutions, use the first pattern. The second pattern is appropriate when you have a list of specific problems.

Organizational Strategy for Problem and Solution	
Template	Example
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Problems               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Detail A</li> <li>b. Detail B</li> <li>c. Detail C</li> </ul> </li> <li>II. Solutions               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Detail A</li> <li>b. Detail B</li> <li>c. Detail C</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Problems: Climate Change               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Hotter temperatures</li> <li>b. Higher sea levels</li> <li>c. Stronger storms</li> </ul> </li> <li>II. Solutions: Climate Change               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Reducing carbon emissions</li> <li>b. Developing alternative power</li> <li>c. Sequestering atmospheric carbon</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Issue I               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Problem</li> <li>b. Solution</li> </ul> </li> <li>II. Issue II               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Problem</li> <li>b. Solution</li> </ul> </li> <li>III. Issue III               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Problem</li> <li>b. Solution</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Carbon Emissions               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Problem: Carbon released through human activity traps heat</li> <li>b. Solution: Reduce the amount of carbon released into the atmosphere</li> </ul> </li> <li>II. Deforestation               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Problem: Deforestation means that there are fewer trees to absorb atmospheric carbon</li> <li>b. Solution: Replant forests</li> </ul> </li> <li>III. Misinformation               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Problem: Many people don't believe climate change is real</li> <li>b. Solution: Expose corporate misinformation campaigns</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## Topic

Topical patterns are used when other patterns of organization cannot be applied. This pattern consists of topics and subtopics.

Organizational Strategy for Topics	
Template	Example
I. Topic I a. Subtopic A b. Subtopic B c. Subtopic C	I. Prequel Trilogy Characters a. Anakin Skywalker b. Obi-Wan Kenobi c. Padmé Amidala
II. Topic II a. Subtopic D b. Subtopic E c. Subtopic F	II. Original Trilogy Characters a. Luke Skywalker b. Princess Leia c. Han Solo
III. Topic III a. Subtopic G b. Subtopic H c. Subtopic I	III. Sequel Trilogy Characters a. Kylo Ren b. Poe Dameron c. Finn

## Organization Worksheet

For practice organizing your work, please see the worksheet at the end of this handout.

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## Organizational Structure

**Sections**

**Paragraphs**

**Sections**

**Paragraphs**

A

1  
2  
3

1

A  
B  
C

B

1  
2  
3

2

A  
B  
C

C

1  
2  
3

3

A  
B  
C

## Comparison/Contrast

What am I comparing/contrasting?

- A. \_\_\_\_\_  
B. \_\_\_\_\_  
C. \_\_\_\_\_

What are my points of comparison/contrast?

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## Space

What spaces am I discussing?

- A. \_\_\_\_\_  
B. \_\_\_\_\_  
C. \_\_\_\_\_

What features of those spaces am I discussing?

1. \_\_\_\_\_



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2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

## Time

What times am I discussing?

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

What features of those times am I discussing?

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

