

# Swarthmore College Writing Center

## Organizing Your Ideas

Once you have an idea for your paper, you're ready to move on to the next stage of the writing process. For some people, that means moving directly on to a first draft; however, many experienced writers use other organizational techniques before writing. These strategies help create a road map for your paper. They save time and energy by organizing your ideas and showing how they are related.

### ***Outlining***

Outlining is a way to organize your ideas and see the connections between them. It can be useful before you write or when you revise, helping you find flaws in your argument. There are many different styles of outlining. The extent of your outlining can vary from including just the main points of your paper to including every paragraph. Use whatever works for you, but try to highlight the connections between ideas instead of just listing them. This will help you organize more effectively.

When you outline, you move from broad ideas to specific details. Start with your thesis or main idea, and identify the major points that support it. These can become topic sentences, which explain the main point of each paragraph and how it relates to your thesis. Under your topic sentences, list the evidence and details that support them.

Here are some questions to think about when organizing:

- Is there an obvious way to organize your material? Is there a natural chronology to follow?
- Do some points depend on others? What does the reader need to know first, second, etc.?
- Do some of your points rely on similarities? Do some of them require highlighting differences?
- Do you have many counterarguments to address?

If you're still stuck on organization, bring your ideas to the Writing Center. We can help you organize your thesis, claims, and evidence into a coherent structure, even if you haven't written anything yet. There are resources in our library that can help you get started as well. Check out p. 216 in *The Craft of Argument* (Williams and Colomb, 2001).

### ***Listing***

Try putting a list of all that you want to say (phrases, ideas, references, quotes) at the top of your page (or type them before your first paragraph). Try to organize them based on chronology or logic. You can also list by topic, to see if paragraphs develop logically from the groupings. If these tactics don't work, choose two ideas that are related and just write what you want to say about them. Continue fitting things in as you can until everything on your list has been incorporated into your text. Write without worrying about organization or grammar. Now you can go back through your paper and move, add, or remove sentences to create a better structure for your paper.

### ***Reading for Flow***

If you want to double-check your paper for coherence after you write (and that's never a bad idea), there are a few ways to do so. Perhaps the simplest is asking someone else to read it over. Writing Center WAs are available to help you, or you can ask a friend or classmate.

Another good idea is to create a flow chart or post-outline. You don't need anything fancy; just read through your paper and write a brief summary of each paragraph in the margin. Go back to the start and read through them in sequence. Here are some questions to ask yourself as you move through the paper:

- Are there any gaps in moving from one point to the next?
- Are the connections between your ideas presented out of order or not presented at all?
- Are there some repetitive ideas that can be condensed?
- Are there paragraphs that stray from your main topic?