

Reorganizing Drafts

After reading this article, you should be able to utilize strategies to help you rethink your draft's organization.

How Organization Affects “Flow”

Many students who come to the Writing Center wonder whether their draft “flows;” that is, whether the ideas are connected in a logical order to create a compelling argument. If you're worried about flow, chances are you're sensing some problems with your organizational scheme.

Prerequisites

Two prerequisites will help you reorganize your draft:

1. **A working thesis statement** is vital in giving you focus and organization (If you're having trouble with this, see our thesis statement handout).
2. **Well-developed paragraphs** will organize your ideas if they are all fully fleshed out (see our handouts on paragraph development and transitions).

Strategies

Here are five effective strategies you can use to reorganize: **reverse outlining**, **talking it out**, **sectioning**, **listing/narrowing your argument**, and **visualizing**. Read through all of them in order to find the best fit for your current needs.

Strategy 1: Reverse Outlining

Let's say your paper is about Mark Twain's novel, *Huckleberry Finn*. Your thesis is: **“Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* suggests that to**

find the true expression of American democratic ideals, one must leave ‘civilized’ society and go back to nature.” If you feel uncertain whether your paper really follows through on the thesis, try reverse outlining.

A “reverse” outline is one you make after you have written a draft. Your aim is to create an outline of **what you’ve already written** (as opposed to an outline that you make before you begin to write). The reverse outline will help you evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your organization and your argument. Reverse outlining can help you:

- **See how your ideas are arranged**
- **Look for gaps in your reasoning**
- **Identify unnecessary repetition**
- **Check whether you are answering all parts of the assignment prompt**
- **Identify places that need transitions**
- **Tell whether your ideas are presented in a logical order**

Take Notes

Read your draft and jot down brief notes in the margin about what each paragraph is about, the main idea. It may be helpful to number your paragraphs; if your organization needs some changes, numbered paragraphs are easy to move around.

If you’re concerned that your paragraphs aren’t unified (that is, if there’s more than one main idea in each paragraph), make a more detailed reverse outline that includes a note about the main idea of each sentence. This will help you decide how to organize your paragraphs so that each sentence (and paragraph) contains one main idea.

Make an Outline

After you've gone through the entire draft, make an outline by transferring your notes to a fresh sheet of paper, listing them in the order in which they appear. Write in whatever style is comfortable to you (Since you're the only person who will use the outline). Create an outline of what is actually in your paper, rather than what you intended to include or think should be in it.

A reverse outline about the *Huckleberry Finn* thesis (listed above) might look like this:

- **Paragraph 1: introduction and thesis:** “Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* suggests that to find the true expression of American democratic ideals, one must leave ‘civilized’ society and go back to nature.”
- **Paragraph 2: Background on Huck Finn**
- **Paragraph 3: River for Huck and Jim. Also shore for Jim.**
- **Paragraph 4: Shore for Huck. Shore and laws for Jim.**
- **Paragraph 5: Shore and family, school.**
- **Paragraph 6: River and freedom, democracy.**
- **Paragraph 7: River and shore similarities.**
- **Paragraph 8: Conclusion.**

After making the outline, take a break!

Examine the Outline

Look at each point of your outline, considering the following questions:

- If you are worried about **coherence**, ask:
 - **How is this idea related to my thesis?**
 - **How is this idea related to the ideas that come before and after it?**
- If you are worried about **repetition**, ask:
 - **Do the same words or phrases appear in several places?**
 - **Could I eliminate or combine some paragraphs and/or sentences?**
- If you are concerned about **logic and transitions**, ask:
 - **Is this the order I would use if I were explaining my idea to a friend?**
 - **Is this order easy for readers to follow?**
 - **Why did I put the ideas in this order** (What was my organizing principle)?
 - **Are there places where I suddenly change topics or bring up a new idea** (If so, do those places have strong transitions)?
 - **Did I follow the order my thesis suggests?**
 - **Did I include everything the thesis promised to cover?**
- If you are concerned about **answering the prompt**, ask:
 - **If I look at the prompt as a checklist**, did I answer all of the questions in the prompt?
 - **Do I have the right balance between different parts of the assignment** (for example, have I balanced my summary of someone else’s argument and my criticisms)?

Let’s go back to our *Huckleberry Finn* example. There’s a lot of repetition in our reverse outline; the word “shore” comes up in almost every paragraph. You may have noticed other issues, too. When revising, consider the following options:

- **Combine** all the shore scenes into a single section, so all the paragraphs on that topic are adjacent to each other.
- **Give “shore for Jim” its own paragraph** instead of having it as an add-on part of paragraph 3.
- **Drop any off-topic discussions** (For example, the law for Jim).
- **Move your discussion of the similarities between the shore and the river to an earlier point in the paper.**
- **Add a new paragraph** to address an idea you forgot to include.

Your revised outline might look like this:

- **Paragraph 1: introduction and thesis:** “Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* suggests that to find the true expression of American democratic ideals, one must leave ‘civilized’ society and go back to nature.”
- **Paragraph 2:** Define American democratic ideals and how they’re truly expressed
- **Paragraph 3:** River and shore similarities
- **Paragraph 4:** River for Huck and Jim (river = nature)
- **Paragraph 5:** Shore for Huck and Jim (shore=civilization)
- **Paragraph 6:** Shore, family, and school
- **Paragraph 7:** River, freedom, and democracy
- **Paragraph 8:** Conclusion

Re-examine the Thesis, Outline, and Draft Together

Look closely at the outline to see how well it supports your argument (thesis statement). You should be able to see which paragraphs need rewriting, reordering, or rejecting. You may find that some paragraphs don't fit the focus of your argument, or that some paragraphs have more than one idea and need reworking. You might also decide that you need to revise your thesis statement to match what you ended up discussing in the body of your draft.

Once you are happy with your outline, go back to your draft and make all of the necessary changes. Once this is done, begin proofreading.

Strategy 2: Talk It Out

Since we're more accustomed to talking than to writing, the way we explain things out loud often makes more sense to us (and to our audience) than when we first write them down. Talking through your ideas can help you reorganize your draft. **Find a friend, your TA, your professor, a relative, a Writing Center consultant, or any sympathetic and intelligent listener.**

Let's say you're writing about Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. Your working thesis is: **"The New Deal was actually a conservative defense of American capitalism."** For this strategy, follow the steps below:

Explain What Your Paper Is About

Pay attention to **how** you explain your argument. Arrange your ideas and evidence in your paper the same way you would organize them for a listener. Imagine that you begin by describing your working thesis. As you continue to explain, you realize that one of the first

things you talked about was private enterprise. Unfortunately, your draft doesn't address this subject until the last two paragraphs. You may realize that you need to discuss private enterprise near the beginning of your paper.

Take Notes/Record the Conversation

You and your listener should keep track of the way you explain your paper. Written notes are extremely helpful because you won't remember every detail of your conversation. Compare the structure of the argument in the notes you or your listener take to the structure of the draft you've written.

If note-taking isn't for you, try recording your conversation using a tape recorder, digital voice recorder, computer microphone, or iPod and microphone. You can review the conversation and make changes to your draft.

Have Your Listener Ask Questions

If you receive constructive criticism, your writing will become stronger. You want your listener to say things like, "Would you mind explaining that point about being both conservative and liberal again?" or "What kind of economic principle is government relief? Is it communist? Archaic?" or "I thought I knew where your argument was going, and I wasn't expecting you to bring up that issue." **Questions you can't answer may signal an unnecessary tangent or an area that needs further development. If you need to think about a question, you may need to explain it more in your paper.** If your listener doesn't fully understand your paper, it's likely that your readers won't, either.

Strategy 3: Sectioning

Let's say you're working on a paper on euthanasia. Your thesis is: **“Voluntary euthanasia for terminally ill patients is justified on the grounds that it reflects humane values, respects individual autonomy, avoids needless costs, and reduces suffering.”** This paper might be approached using the sectioning strategy.

Sectioning works particularly well for long papers where you will be contending with a number of ideas and a complicated argument. It's also useful if you are having difficulty deciding on the goals of each paragraph.

Place Paragraphs in Categories

Your argument has four main categories of support (values, autonomy, costs, and reduction of suffering), so put each of your paragraphs into one of these. If any paragraph (besides the introduction or conclusion) fits into two categories or all three, feel free to check out our handout on paragraph development. Ideally, each paragraph should have just one central idea. If some paragraphs don't fit any category, then they probably don't belong in your paper.

Examine Each Section

Assuming you have more than one paragraph under each section, try to distinguish between them. For example, under “humane values,” you might have listed an argument in favor of euthanasia, a counterargument, and a reply to the counterargument that strengthens your position. Perhaps you have two separate arguments under “humane values” that can be distinguished from each other by author, logic, ethical principles invoked, etc. Write down the differences; this will help you formulate clear topic sentences. If a single paragraph includes several arguments or points (for example, two arguments and one counterargument) you

probably need to revisit paragraph development. You may be trying to do too many different things within a single paragraph.

Examine Your Argument

Which section should appear first? Why? How should the paragraphs be organized in each section? Look for an order that makes the strongest possible argument.

Strategy 4: Listing and Narrowing Your Argument

Let's say you're writing a history paper, and your working thesis is this: **“While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons, while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.”**

What might be giving you trouble is that you've created some very broad categories to work with (slavery, morality, institutions). They're all relevant to the Civil War, but there's only so much you can do in a three-, five-, or ten-page paper. Try to narrow your argument by finding more specific terms. This will help you rethink your organization. In a compare and contrast paper like this one, where you distinguish between and explain two sides of an issue, listing can help clarify both the organization and the argument.

Make a List

In two columns, list the reasons why each side fought the Civil War, limiting yourself to reasons you address (however briefly) in your draft. Let's say you come up with the following:

North	South
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Slavery	Slavery
Moral issues	Self-government
Humane treatment	Right to property
Against tyranny	Against tyranny
Against oppression of slaves	Against federal government oppression

As you can see, some of the issues pertain to both sides while some are exclusive. Thus, the listing process should quickly confirm whether the draft obeys the argument laid out in the thesis.

Examine the Thesis

Listing helps make your argument more clear. A revised thesis statement might read: *Both sides believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, but while the South fought for the political and economic rights of slave owners, the North fought for the human rights of slaves.* This is more specific, which should help you organize your draft more successfully.

Examine the Draft's Structure

You probably want to establish the similarities first and then explain the differences. Did you begin with the similarities? If not, you may want to reorganize.

Reorganize the Argument

Ask yourself which differences are the most important. The order in which you present your points generally gives your readers a hierarchy of significance.

Strategy 5: Visualizing

A visual technique called clustering, mapping, or webbing can help you rethink a draft's organization (See our handout on brainstorming). Clustering, mapping, or webbing can help you visually connect the points in your draft. Mapping out your draft helps you see its structure in a new way: you'll get a clearer sense of the location and order of your ideas. It should be easier to edit your paper into a more cohesive final draft.

Final Thoughts

Learning new strategies for reorganizing your drafts will greatly strengthen your writing process. Most writers find that their ideas develop as they write, so their beginning outlines don't always reflect their completed drafts. Taking the time to examine and rework your first draft's organization will make your final paper easier for readers to follow. We hope the techniques suggested in this handout will help you get things organized!

This information originally appeared in a handout from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center.