

How to Structure a Paper

When we refer to the *structure* of a paper, we mean the way the paper is organized. Well-structured papers take the time to creatively introduce the subject matter, present the content in a clear and logical order, and conclude by reinforcing the main idea and providing a sense of closure. In other words, good papers have an identifiable beginning, middle, and end.

Introduction

Good writers gracefully introduce their subject to the reader. They capture the reader's attention, gain his interest, and guide him gracefully into the body of the paper. Front page news articles are exceptions to this rule and tend to skip an introduction. This is because newspaper readers typically read purely for information and want it presented as efficiently as possible. They want the most important information in the first few sentences. Most other kinds of writing, however, require some kind of introduction.

A good introduction often includes a hook—an opening sentence that grabs the reader's attention like a baited hook snags a fish. Most strong introductions don't bash the reader over the head with the main idea either. Sure, you should include the main idea in the first paragraph, but not necessarily in the first sentence. Catch his attention and draw the reader into the point of the paper. Often the best place for the main idea—thesis—of the paper is the last sentence of the first paragraph.

Body

The body contains the information that supports the main idea presented in the introduction. These supporting points must be presented in a logical order. You might refer to this as *body order* (but be careful not to confuse this with *body odor*, which in general should be avoided!).

In narrative writing, process papers, historical non-fiction, and biographies the order is typically *chronological*. This means that events are presented as they occur in time. In other forms of writing like essays, advertisements, and many reports, the order is based on *importance*. This means the writer organizes the points from least to most important, or vice-versa. Descriptive writing is often structured *spatially*, which means things are described as they appear in space. A room, for example, can be described from right to left, top to bottom, front to rear, or from some focal point outward.

No matter what organizational structure your paper has, it is important that you give careful thought to the arrangement of your ideas and the paragraphs that contain them. Remember to stick to one basic idea in each paragraph. When you move on to another topic, even if it is related, start a new paragraph.

Conclusion

Finally, you should give thoughtful attention to the conclusion of any paper you write. In most cases, your paper should have a concluding paragraph that reminds the reader of the main idea or ideas that have been presented. It is best not to include any new information in the concluding paragraph, but to tie up any loose ends and leave your reader with a sense of

completeness. Most good writing has the feel of a slow fade to rolling credits, rather than a sudden click of the off-button.

Many writers find it helpful to begin any writing assignment with an outline that helps them keep their thoughts organized. Others find this practice restrictive and prefer to simply write and fix any structural problems during the revising stage. Either way, the finished product ought to have an identifiable and consistent organizational pattern. Every sentence ought to fit logically into the overall structure. One way to test this is to outline the paper *after* it has been written. If the structure is clear, outlining should not be difficult. You might try this test for yourself on your next paper.