DOUGLASCOLLEGE

Learning Centre

Prewriting Strategies for Organizing Ideas

This handout is about the *organizing* stage of the prewriting process. This is an important stage to pay attention to if you want to improve the overall organization of your paper or the organization of your ideas within paragraphs. Also, spending time at the organizing stage can help you improve the flow of your writing and keep your writing focused on your thesis statement.

The Writing Process

Each writer has a slightly different process for writing, and there isn't any reason for everyone to approach writing in exactly the same way. However, if you incorporate each of the stages of the writing process into your own personal writing method, it's highly likely you will produce better writing.

The stages of the writing process can be thought of as:

Prewriting → Drafting → Revising → Editing

This looks as if writing is a step-by-step process, but in fact, writing goes back and forth between steps. The general direction is from prewriting to the finished, edited version, but within that overall process, writers move back to earlier stages and then forward again. An example is the development of your thesis for an argument paper. You may start with one idea for your thesis, but find that you change or reshape it as you learn more about the topic. The point to remember is that moving back and then forwards is part of the writing process. Don't be discouraged by it. It shows you're thinking, and it's what good writers do. Just make sure you schedule enough time for the thinking-writing-rethinking-rewriting process to take place.

The prewriting stage involves not only coming up with ideas through research and thinking but also making an organizational plan for your paper.
Often students move directly from getting ideas to constructing an outline, or even directly from getting ideas to writing their first draft. Does this sound familiar?

The problem is that those strategies fail to make use of all that prewriting has to offer. You get the 'warm up' benefit of exploring ideas – your thinking gets started – but it doesn't do much to create the focus and organization that are critical to academic writing. The steps *between* getting ideas and drafting are essential. Do them well, and prewriting really pays off.

Organizing your Ideas

Depending on the type of writing you are doing, your ideas may come from your own reflections on the topic, or it may include ideas from your research, classes and assigned readings. If you are working with notes, it's helpful to begin by reviewing them to identify ideas you want to include. (If you aren't familiar with strategies for coming up with ideas, talk with your tutor and/or see the Learning Centre handout WR2.32 *Strategies for Exploring Ideas.*)

Let's assume you have already gathered together some ideas that could go in your paper.   If you are writing an argumentative essay, at this point, you may already have a thesis. If not, take time now to look at your ideas, give it thought, and write a tentative thesis. (See the Learning Centre handouts WR2.42 *Detective's Guide to Finding a Strong Thesis* and WR4.20 *The Thesis Statement* for further help with creating your thesis statement.) Three questions you can ask to help you are:
- What are the key ideas and differing opinions about your topic?
- What overall idea or point of view do most, or some, or all of your ideas and information support?
- Which of your ideas directly answer the question, issue or topic posed by your assignment?
- Which of the ideas interest you most?

One way to check to make sure that you have an argument in your thesis is to ask yourself what the opposing view is. Once you have a sense of your tentative or working thesis, you are ready for the organizing stage. The following steps can help you organize and focus your writing, move you to your outline, and from

there to your first draft. Go to the last pages of this handout to see an example of how one person worked through these steps.

Step One: Select

With your tentative thesis in mind, go through your ideas and cross out the information that no longer seems relevant. (Tip: Don't erase it completely. Keep it in case it turns out to be useful later on.)

Step Two: Group

Put the ideas that seem most closely related together. At this stage, you're not worrying about the order of the ideas, just the group they belong with. How you go about grouping your ideas depends on the type of prewriting strategy you have used. For more information about strategies for coming up with ideas, see the Learning Centre handout WR2.32 *Prewriting: Strategies for Exploring Ideas.* If you are:

i) Working from a list of ideas

On the computer, you can simply move the ideas in your list around. If you're using pen and paper, assign letters or some other symbol to the ideas. For example, items in one group might be all assigned "A," items in another group might be labeled "B," and so on. Another way to group the ideas could be to draw arrows to show the connected ideas.

ii) Working from a Cluster Map (Web)

If you've used this strategy, you've already grouped your ideas. However, it's important to look again and consider whether you still agree with the initial connections you made amongst ideas. Considering your working thesis and the ideas you took out because they no longer seemed relevant, do you need to rearrange your ideas and create different groupings?

iii) Working from Freewriting

Underline the points in your freewriting that you want to include in your essay; then, work with these ideas as if they were a list [see i) above]. This is a bit messy, so, if you are working with pen and paper, you may want to write out the ideas as a grouped list.

iv) Working from Categorizing

Once you have completed the selection step, you may find that you want to move some items from one category to another. For instance, if you have deleted some of the points in one category, the remaining points might then fit

better in another category. Examine your categories with your working thesis in mind and ask yourself how you need to group them to support your argument.

3. Step Three: Expand

At this step you look critically at your groups of ideas and identify any that lack sufficient support. You may be able to solve this problem simply by thinking about them and doing some more prewriting. However, you'll probably want to reread your notes, and it's quite possible that you will need to do some more research to fill the gaps.

4. Step Four: Order → Outline

This is the point at which you decide the order of ideas within each group, and the order you will use for the groups.   First, you should examine the ideas to see if there is one or more general idea which the other ideas in the group support. If you have supporting details but nothing that states the major point they support, you may have to write the general idea at this point. Usually, each group becomes a paragraph, with your general idea as your topic sentence. (For more on paragraph writing, see the Learning Centre handout WR2.56 *The Multi-Point Paragraph*.)

Now:

- check your thesis. Is it still a fit with what you intend to say, or have your ideas changed? You may find that you need to alter and clarify your thesis. This is often the case, and taking the time to align your thesis with the direction in which your ideas have evolved will help focus your writing. It is much easier to write a paper when the relationship between your thesis statement and your supporting arguments is clear to you.

- think about your conclusion. Your conclusion should be both a restatement of your thesis and a concise summary of your essay. Write your conclusion in point form so it can become part of your outline.

You now have an outline for your paper. It might be a bit messy, so you may want to re-copy it to make it easy to follow for the next stage, your first draft. Because you have thought about your ideas and worked through how they connect to each other and support your thesis, you are likely to find writing your first draft easier than you anticipated.

Resources

Some other Learning Centre resources that might help you:

Prewriting

Overviews

Now, Check out the Example

See the next two pages for an example of how one person worked through the steps of the organization process for a paper on the topic of global food issues.

List and Select

Global Food Crisis

- author ✓ Raj Patel

✓ - 3rd world farmer suicides

✓ 60's green Revolution ⸺ pesticides

fertilizers depend.

?- lack of water (now lower prod.

- ~~global transportation~~ ⟿ loans → debt

~~green house gases~~

▷✓ - Monsanto - terminator seeds

⟿ more seed savers

?- starvation ⌐ Cdn wheat & canola

patenting seeds

- ~~shopping locally~~ private ownership

~~organic~~

✓ - monocultures - insect susceptibility

✓ - genetically modified foods - soya (tofu)

~~canola~~

- ~~lost skills - people don't grow vegetables~~

{ ✓ - vertical integration

✓ - farmer sells → processor owned by

distributer → owned by supermarkets

✓ - farmer get only a few cents

- ~~lower nb nutritional value of food~~

- ~~obesity - processed food~~ ~~high fructose~~

(adult) ~~diabetes corn syrup~~

- ~~corn - enthonol fuel → food become fuel~~

working - ~~north Am. farm subsidies - Mexico can't compete~~

^Thesis: The Green Revolution, was once

seen as the a solution to world

hunger and poverty, has contribu-

ted to the debt, starvation, & soil

degradation in developing countries

Group, Expand and Order

Green Revolution

① — Define ——→ (1a) 1960's?
When? What did it
(1c) involve?, who financed? (1d)
pesticides ¢ What problems was it (iii) World
fertilizers (1b) addressing? Bank
ii) - economic ii) foreign aid
under development iii) foreign tech.
i) — Population
growth ¢
hunger

b) vertical integration
¢ middle men
c) a) supply ¢
② — outcomes demand
(2b) starvation — ii) lower prices
iv) - suicides — iii) only grow one
crop ¢ can't eat
farmers iii) machines
(2a) debt borrow money
iv) ii) i) fertilizers
iia) terminator seeds
soil degradation — monocultures
?? other things ??
(2b) iii) unemployment

New Working Thesis:
The "Green Revolution", was an attempt
to address use agricultural innovation
to address issues of hunger and economic
underdevelopment, has contributed to
increased debt and dependency in
developing countries. → lower standards
of living