Reorganizing drafts

What this handout is about

This handout gives you strategies to help you rethink your draft's organization.

Why reorganize?

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 make a compelling argument. If you're worried about flow, chances are you're sensing some problems with your organizational scheme. It's time to reorganize!

Prerequisites

Two prerequisites will help you reorganize your draft. One is vital: a working thesis statement to give you a focus for organizing. If you're having trouble with this, see the thesis statement handout. The other thing you might want to check before you begin is your paragraph development. It will be easier to reorganize your ideas if they are all fully fleshed out.

Strategies

Here are five effective strategies you can use to reorganize: reverse outlining, talking it out, sectioning, listing and narrowing your argument, and visualizing. Read through all of them before you begin and decide which seems like 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." You feel uncertain whether your paper really follows through on the thesis as promised.

Your paper may benefit from reverse outlining, to make sure it delivers on its promising thesis. 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 the kind of outline that you make before you begin to write. The reverse outline will help you evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of both your organization and your argument. You will be able to 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, and tell whether you are presenting ideas in a logical order.

Read the draft and take notes

Read your draft over, and as you do so, make very brief notes in the margin about what each paragraph is trying to accomplish. You may find it helpful to number your paragraphs; if you decide that your organization needs some changes, the numbers will make it easier to locate paragraphs and move them around.

If you are concerned that your paragraphs may not be unified (that is, that you are talking about more than one main idea in each paragraph), you can make a more detailed reverse outline that includes a note about the main idea of each sentence. This will ultimately help you decide where to break your paragraphs so that each one sticks to one main idea.

Make the outline

After you've gone through the entire draft, make your outline by transferring your brief notes to a fresh sheet of paper, listing them in the order in which they appear. You can write in whatever style you are comfortable using; it's o.k. to write in sentence fragments or use abbreviations, since you are the only person who will be using the outline. Make sure you are creating an outline of what is actually in your paper, rather than what you intended to have in it or think should be in it! A reverse outline of your paper about *Huckleberry Finn* might look something like this:

> Paragraph 1: Intro. 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 for a few minutes!

Examine the outline

Now it's time to focus on your outline. Look at each point and ask yourself questions that address your top concerns.

> If you are worried about **coherence**, you can 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**, you can ask:
> *Do the same words or phrases appear in several places here?*
> *If so, could I eliminate or combine some of the paragraphs or sentences?*
>
> If you are concerned about **overall logic and transitions**, you can ask:
> *Is this the order I would use if I were explaining my idea to a friend in conversation? Will this order be easy for readers to follow?*
> *Why did I put the ideas in this order—what was my organizing principle?*
> *Are there places where I seem to 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, and did I include everything the thesis promised to cover?*
>
> If you are concerned about **answering the prompt**, you can 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 of the argument)?*

Feel free to create more questions that address your concerns about the particular paper you are working on.

Let's go back to our *Huckleberry Finn* example for a moment. There seems to be a lot of repetition in our reverse outline—the word "shore" comes up in almost every paragraph. You may have noticed other issues, too. If you revise, what are some of your options?

1. You might decide that you want to combine all the shore scenes into a single section, so all the paragraphs on that topic are adjacent to each other.

2. You might decide to give "shore for Jim" its own paragraph, instead of having it as an add-on in paragraph 3.

3. You might end up dropping the discussion of the law for Jim, if you decide it is off-topic.

   You might decide to move your discussion of the similarities between the shore and the river to an earlier point in the paper.

4. You might decide you need a new paragraph to address an idea you forgot to include.

Your revised outline might look like this:

Paragraph 1: Intro. 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, the outline, and the draft together

Look closely at the outline and see how well it supports the argument in your thesis statement. You should be able to see which paragraphs need rewriting, reordering, or rejecting. You may find that some paragraphs are tangential or irrelevant to 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 better fit 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 the necessary changes. It's wise to finish all of the changes to your organization before you begin proofreading.

Strategy 2. Talking it out

Let's say you're writing about Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, and your working thesis is: "The New Deal was actually a conservative defense of American capitalism."

Since we are more accustomed to talking than to writing, the way we explain things out loud often makes more sense both to us and to our audience than the way 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 tutor, or any sympathetic and intelligent listener

Your listener does not need to be an expert on the subject matter your paper addresses.

Explain what your paper is about

Pay attention to **how** you explain your argument. Chances are that the order in which you present your ideas and evidence to your listener is a logical way to arrange them in your paper. Let's say 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—but 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 or record the conversation

You and your listener should keep track of the way you explain your paper. Written notes are extremely helpful—you won't be able to remember all the details 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.

Another good strategy to try is recording your conversation using a tape recorder, digital voice recorder, computer microphone, or iPod and microphone. This will allow you to talk without worrying about taking notes. Later, you can review the conversation and make changes to your draft.

Get your listener to ask questions

It is in your interest as a writer to receive constructive criticism so that your draft will become stronger. You want your listener to say things like, "Would you mind explaining that point about being both conservative and liberal again? I wasn't sure I followed" 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 needing further development in the draft. Questions you need to think about will probably make you realize that you need to explain more in your paper. In short, you want to know that your listener fully understands you; if he or she does not, chances are your readers won't, either.

Strategy 3: Sectioning

Let's say you're working on a paper in which you argue for voluntary euthanasia for terminally ill patients on the grounds that it reflects humane values, respects individual autonomy, avoids needless costs, and reduces suffering.

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.

Put paragraphs under section headings

Your argument has four main categories of support. Put each of your paragraphs into one of the four categories: values, autonomy, costs, and reduction of suffering. If any paragraph (besides the introduction or conclusion) fits into two categories or all three, you may need to look at our paragraph development handout. Ideally, each paragraph should have just one central idea. If some paragraphs don't fit any category, then they probably don't belong in the paper.

Re-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. Or 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 distinctions—they 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.

Re-examine the entire argument

Which section do you want to appear first? Why? Which second? Why? In what order should the paragraphs appear 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."

For this paper, what might be giving you trouble with organization 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 even ten-page paper. If you look more closely, you can narrow your argument by finding more specific terms; narrowing your argument will, in turn, 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
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 and some just to one or the other. Thus, the listing process should relatively quickly confirm whether the draft obeys the argument laid out in the working thesis.

Re-examine the thesis

You can now see that the draft offers clearer terms for your argument. A revised thesis statement might now 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 revised thesis offers more specifics, which should help you organize your draft more successfully by narrowing the scope.

Re-examine the draft's general structure

It seems from the list and the revised thesis statement that you probably want to establish the similarities first and then explain the differences. Check your draft; did you begin with the similarities and then move on to the differences? If not, you need to reorganize.

Reorganize the argument

You still need to ask yourself which differences are most important. The order in which you present your points generally reflects a hierarchy of significance for your readers to follow.

Strategy 5: Visualizing

Many people find that a visual technique called clustering, mapping, or webbing is a good tool for rethinking a draft's organization. We tell you how to use these techniques in the handout on brainstorming.

When you are working on reorganizing a draft, clustering, mapping, or webbing can help you visually connect the points in your draft. Mapping your draft helps you see its structure in a new way: you'll get a clearer sense of the location and arrangement of your ideas. As a result, it should be easier to make editorial choices that will lead to 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 and that outlines made during the pre-writing stage don't always reflect the structure of the completed draft. Taking the time to examine and, if necessary, rework your organization after writing your first draft will result in a final paper that is easier for readers to follow. We hope the techniques suggested in this handout will help you get things organized!