

Organizing Your Paper¹

Midwestern Writer's Studio Handout

“Good writing is clear thinking made visible.”

- Screenwriter Bill Wheeler

The quote above is one of my favorite descriptions of good writing. It also serves as a good reminder that clear writing doesn't happen by accident; it's the result of thinking about what we want to say and how to say it in a way that makes sense to the reader. This is particularly important when it comes to academic writing, when the key purpose is to advance and explain coherent and logical arguments.

So how do we get there? First, it's essential to understand the core purpose of most academic papers.

1. Core purpose: making a case for your thesis statement

A thesis statement is a specific, arguable claim that you set out to prove in your paper. (For more details, see the Writer's Studio handout “Developing a Strong Thesis Statement.”) **That means that the purpose of most academic papers is to make a convincing case for your thesis statement.** Traditionally, that will involve introducing the thesis to the reader, presenting three or four reasons why the thesis is true, and then concluding.

Let's take a look at how to do that effectively in both academic essays and research papers.²

2. Developing Supporting Points (Academic Essay)

Let's say that you have a thesis statement in hand. How do you organize your essay to present and build a strong case for your claim?

- ✓ Brainstorm possible supporting arguments. Write them out as complete sentences. Note that it's often a good idea to brainstorm a few more ideas than you need.

¹ Author: Jennifer Hearson. Adapted from English Composition I “Developing Supporting Points” notes and “Organizing Your Paper” Workshop, 10/23/19.

² In this handout, we'll concentrate on developing the core/body of the paper (the thesis statement and supporting arguments). Writing the introduction and the conclusion will be covered in separate documents.

- ✓ Once you have several ideas, go back and choose the 3-4 strongest. (Which arguments make the strongest case for your thesis statement? Make sure to choose arguments that you can explain and develop in some depth.)
- ✓ Decide on a logical order for your supporting arguments.
- ✓ Jot down some ideas about how you will support and explain each argument. (What evidence and/or examples can you think of? Jotting down a list with bullet points is often a good approach at this step.)

You should now have a rough plan (or “working outline”) for your essay – one that will allow you to 1) keep focused on making a case for your thesis statement and 2) do so in an organized and logical way.

Let’s look at an example.³

Let’s say I start with the following thesis statement: *The story of the Exodus clearly foreshadows the work of Christ.*

After brainstorming 4-5 supporting points, I choose the three strongest:

- ✓ *The Passover lamb foreshadows Christ Himself.*
- ✓ *Through one man, God rescues His people from bondage.*
- ✓ *Rescue itself is not the goal; the goal is to know God and to live in relationship with Him.*

Because I’m starting with Exodus and drawing parallels to Christ’s work, I decide that it makes the most sense to arrange the arguments chronologically, following the Exodus story. I then jot down some ideas about how I’m going to develop, explain, and support each point.

Thesis statement: *The story of the Exodus clearly foreshadows the work of Christ.*

Supporting arguments:

1. *Through one man, God rescues His people from bondage.* (This paragraph/argument will go on to compare how God used Moses to rescue the Israelites from slavery and Christ to rescue us from the bondage of sin.)
2. *The Passover lamb foreshadows Christ Himself.* (This argument will go on to explain that in both biblical stories, the shedding of innocent blood leads to God’s protection from death and judgment.)

³ This example adapted from English Composition I “Modeling the Process (Developing Supporting Points)” notes.

3. *Rescue itself is not the goal; the goal is to know God and to live in relationship with Him.* (This argument will go on to explain how the Israelites made their way to the Promised Land – a place to know God and live with Him, and how Christ-followers are not just saved, but are saved to know God and to live in relationship with Him now and forevermore.)

Obviously, I will still need to write out my essay, including creating an introduction and a conclusion. However, I now have a clear purpose (making a case for my thesis statement) and a clear plan of how to do that in a logical and organized way.

We're going to follow a similar process for the research paper – with just a few modifications.

3. Developing Supporting Points (Research Paper)

Let's say that you have done a fair amount of research into your topic, and you have a clear thesis statement in hand. How do you organize all your ideas and your research into 3-4 coherent arguments that make a case for your thesis?

- ✓ Look through and sort your research notes.
- ✓ Identify the supporting arguments that you have found in your research (reasons that support/make a case for your thesis statement). Summarize each argument in one clear sentence.
- ✓ Choose the 3-4 strongest, most convincing arguments (and/or the ones you have the most evidence for).

Let me pause here and make one suggestion. **At this stage of the organization process, it's extremely helpful to have your supporting arguments and some of your key evidence written down in a form that allows you to physically move around individual ideas.** That might mean index cards, post-it notes, text boxes that you print out and cut apart, or digital notecards that you can move around on a screen. Here's why: doing so makes trying out different possible arrangements of ideas much easier and much less intimidating. After all, if you try one particular order and don't like it, you can just rearrange your ideas until you find something that works better.

- ✓ Decide on a logical order for the 3-4 arguments.
- ✓ Next, consider how to organize and present material within each argument. What order will flow the best/make the most sense to the reader?
- ✓ Once you've come up with an organization you're happy with, record a "snapshot" of your plan with a working outline. Note that a working outline is not written in stone; it is simply an overview of your current plan, and can be changed at any time as needed.

It will be a helpful overview to work from when you start drafting your paper, though. (See the Writer's Studio handout "The Benefits of Developing a Working Outline" for more detail on this point.)

- ✓ It's often a good idea to label your notecards (or post-it notes) in some way, so that even if the cards get out of order, you can still find the material you need (e.g. cards for supporting argument 1 might be labeled 1a, 1b, 1c, etc., or might be color-coded).

For an **example**, see the "Sample Working Outline" document provided on The Writer's Studio web page.

Additional resources

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/the_writing_process/developing_an_outline/how_to_outline.html

Purdue's OWL (Online Writing Lab) explains why outlining is key to effective writing (particularly with longer, more complex papers) and gives some suggestions on how to approach the outlining process.

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/argument/>

UNC's Writing Center provides a helpful discussion of academic argumentation – what it is, why it's key, and how to use evidence and knowledge of your audience to develop strong claims and arguments. A section on reading sources critically is included, as well.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZUrIFy84Kw&feature=youtu.be>

This brief video (1:48) by UNC's Writing Center gives a quick overview of outlining as a way to organize your ideas and plan your paper.