THE WRITING PROCESS
Rhetorical Strategies: Patterns of Development

One of the many choices you have to make in the writing process is how to arrange your material. All writers begin with an idea and then work to translate their thoughts about a subject into a clear and easily read essay. This is made relatively easy when your assignment specifies a particular pattern of development.

Probing your subject by asking a series of questions can often help you to order your ideas by suggesting an effective arrangement for your essay.

Even if your assignment does not specify a particular pattern of development, asking the questions below can still help you to develop an arrangement for your essay.

PATTERNS OF DEVELOPMENT

Narration....... What happened?
When did it happen?
Where did it happen?

Description..... What does it look like?
What are its characteristics?

Exemplification.. What are some typical cases or examples of it?

Process......... How did it happen?
What makes it work?
How is it made?

Cause and Effect.. Why did it happen?
What caused it?
What does it cause?
What are its effects?
How is it related to something else?

Comparison and Contrast........... How is it like other things?
How is it different from other things?
Why you want organization.

When we talk about effective writing, we often think first about elements like word choice, grammar and mechanics, and content or evidence. But a really important part of effective writing is clear, logical organization.

Maybe an analogy will help here. I know where every tool and ingredient is in my kitchen, and I can cook pretty efficiently. When I begin a recipe, I bring out all the ingredients, measure them, and line them up in the order in which I'll use them. Even complicated recipes seem fairly easy once I have everything laid out, and the organization gives me some sense of control.

In the chaos of my garage, on the other hand, I don't know where anything is, and I'll leave a faucet dripping for a week because I don't want to hunt down a screwdriver or a wrench. I find it hard even to imagine more complicated projects. My office looks like a shambles, too, and I've
wasted a lot of time looking for a book or document that I know is here somewhere. Thinking and acting are both harder when things are disorganized.

The same principle affects you and me as writers and readers. When things are laid out in some sort of order, we can work with them more easily. If we can impose some kind of order on information, the information is easier to talk about, easier to understand, and easier to remember. If you choose a clear, recognizable pattern (for a single paragraph, and also for a whole essay), you find it easier to select details and choose transitions, and you also help your reader discover relationships that connect things, that make things seem more coherent.

How you find organization . . .

Humor me for a moment and agree that organization is really desirable, both in the process of writing and in the product of writing. The remaining problem is figuring out how to create or impose that organization.

My garage is such a mess that I can't see beyond the clutter, but other people have neat garages, so I know a clean garage is possible. I just need to choose some principle of organization.

I could start by putting all the lawn and garden stuff on the left wall and all the house maintenance stuff on the right wall. Then I could arrange the two sides maybe all the big stuff (rakes, mower, ladder, tiller, power saw) closer to the garage door, and smaller stuff nearer to the far wall. Or I could arrange everything in alphabetical order, hanging or standing the stuff clockwise from the left wall, around the back, and then back along the right wall. Or I could put supplies on one wall, power tools on another, and manual hand tools on the third. Or I could have a section for gardening, a section for exterior house maintenance, and another for interior house maintenance. Maybe I could arrange them in order of frequency of use (if I ever used any of it . . .). Actually, any of those principles of order would help me find stuff in my garage I just have to choose one principle and impose it.

It's the same with writing. With any given group of ideas and details, you might use any of a number of principles of organization, and any one of them would help you and your reader. Some will be better than others, of course (I really can't see alphabetizing the tools and supplies in my garage, even though it would make them easier to find later). The main trick to imposing organization is to know some options and to choose one.

[By the way, another similarity between organizing my garage and organizing writing is the need for some motivation. I don't want to organize my garage, because I don't want to do any work around the house to begin with. Leaving the place a mess suits me fine. If I never wanted to write or talk or think, I wouldn't need to deal with organizing ideas or details. Give some thought to your own motivation as you think about this stuff.]

Patterns of Exposition (versus Principles of Organization)
In A Writer's Reference, Diana Hacker talks about "patterns of organization" (section C4-c, pp. 26-31). She identifies these as examples and illustrations, narration, description, process, comparison and contrast, analogy, cause and effect, classification and division, definition. But these are not exclusively patterns of organization. As Hacker herself says, these patterns are "sometimes called methods of development." Randall Decker uses the same patterns to group essays in our reader, and he calls them "patterns of exposition." A slightly more formal term you may run across is "rhetorical modes." These patterns (or methods or modes) are partially patterns of organization, and partially patterns of development that is, sometimes they help you organize content; other times they help you find content.

Some of these rhetorical modes do imply basic patterns for organizing information. Underlying organizational patterns seem particularly clear in comparison & contrast [you can look at the online discussion of comparison and contrast to see its basic organizational patterns]; in process [do this, then do this, then do this; or this happens, then this happens, then this happens]; and in cause & effect [this happens, then (as a result) this happens]. Organization is also imposed by definition [narrowing groups of meanings, from the broad class to which the term belongs, to the narrower groups, to the individual distinguishing characteristics], and in most narration [this happened, then this happened, then this happened].

**Principles of Organization**

I think you can develop a more flexible sense of organization if you also look at some patterns that are more exclusively patterns or principles of organization. You should understand, though, that these four broad principles have many variations, that they sometimes overlap with patterns of development or exposition, and that good writing sometimes combines different methods.

**Chronological Order (order of Time)**

In chronological order or time order, items, events, or even ideas are arranged in the order in which they occur. This pattern is marked by such transitions as next, then, the following morning, a few hours later, still later, that Wednesday, by noon, when she was seventeen, before the sun rose, that April, and so on.

Chronological order can suit different rhetorical modes or patterns of exposition. It naturally fits in narration, because when we tell a story, we usually follow the order in which events occur. Chronological order applies to process in the same way, because when we describe or explain how something happens or works, we usually follow the order in which the events occur. But chronological order may also apply to example, description, or parts of any other pattern of exposition.
Another principle of organization is spatial order. In this pattern, items are arranged according to their physical position or relationships. In describing a shelf or desk, I might describe items on the left first, then move gradually toward the right. Describing a room, I might start with what I see as I enter the door, then what I see as I step to the middle of the room, and finally the far side. In explaining some political or social problem, I might discuss first the concerns of the East Coast, then those of the Midwest, then those of the West Coast. Describing a person, I might start at the feet and move up to the head, or just the other way around. This pattern might use such transitions as just to the right, a little further on, to the south of Memphis, a few feet behind, in New Mexico, turning left on the pathway, and so on. Spatial order is pretty common in description, but can also apply to examples, to some comparisons, some classifications [the southern species of this bird . . . ; rhinos in Southeast Asia . . .], some narrations [meanwhile, out on the prairie . . .], and other forms of exposition as well.

Climactic Order (Order of Importance)

A third common principle of organization is climactic order or order of importance. In this pattern, items are arranged from least important to most important. Typical transitions would include more important, most difficult, still harder, by far the most expensive, even more damaging, worse yet, and so on. This is a flexible principle of organization, and may guide the organization of all or part of example, comparison & contrast, cause & effect, and description.

A variation of climactic order is called psychological order. This pattern or organization grows from our learning that readers or listeners usually give most attention to what comes at the beginning and the end, and least attention to what is in the middle. In this pattern, then, you decide what is most important and put it at the beginning or the end; next you choose what is second most important and put it at the end or the beginning (whichever remains); the less important or powerful items are then arranged in the middle. If the order of importance followed 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, with 5 being most important, psychological order might follow the order 4, 3, 1, 2, 5.

Still other principles of organization based on emphasis include

general-to-specific order,
specific-to general order,
most-familiar-to-least-familiar,
simplest-to-most-complex,
order of frequency,
order of familiarity, and so on.

Topical Order

A fourth broad principle of organization is called topical order, and this is sort of a catchall pattern. It refers to organization that emerges from the topic itself. For example, a description of a computer might naturally involve the separate components of the central processing unit, the monitor, and the keyboard, while a discussion of a computer purchase might discuss needs,
A discussion of a business might explore product, customer, and vendor, and so on. Topical order, then, simply means an order that arises from the nature of the topic itself. Transitions in this pattern will be a little vague—things like another factor, the second component, in addition, and so on.

I'm not sure any single list can identify all of the different logical ways of organizing information. You may have forms in your workplace that impose a certain order on how an event or action is reported. Many people trying to persuade others to change policy or behavior often examine the issue in the order of need or problem first, then the benefits of the change, then the mechanics or ease of implementing the change. You may see a question-answer pattern, a problem-solution pattern, or sometimes a solution-problem pattern. You will also see (and use) combinations of patterns as your ideas and purposes become more complex.

You do need to see, though, that imposing order on information makes the information easier to talk about, easier to understand, and easier to remember. If you choose a clear, recognizable pattern (on the level of the single paragraph, and also on the level of the whole essay body), you guide yourself in selecting details and choosing transitions, and you also guide your reader in discovering relationships that connect things, that make things seem more coherent. [See the section on Transitions.]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization of Development or Rhetorical Modes**</th>
<th>Sample Transitions***</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>chronological order</strong></td>
<td>next; later; the following Tuesday; afterwards; by noon; when she had finally digested the giant burrito; as soon as; in 1998</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>spatial order</strong></td>
<td>just to the right; a little further on; to the south of Memphis; a few feet behind; directly on the bridge of his nose and a centimeter above his gaping, hairy nostrils; turning left on the pathway</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>climactic order</strong></td>
<td>more importantly; best of all; still worse; a more effective approach; even more expensive; even more painful than passing a kidney stone; the least wasteful; occasionally, frequently, regularly</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>topical order</strong></td>
<td>the first element; another key part; a third common principle of organization; Brent also objected to Stella's breath</td>
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- **chronological order**: narration, process, examples and illustrations, cause & effect
- **spatial order**: description, examples & illustrations
- **climactic order**: examples & illustrations, description, comparison & contrast, analogy
- **topical order**: classification & division, comparison & contrast, analogy, definition, examples & illustrations