

## GWT Component 2: Organization and Paragraphing

Every time you write, you have to determine the best way to organize and present your ideas. Your decision is based on who your audience is, what type of writing you are doing, and what your purpose is. Because these aspects are variable, so also should your form or organizational structure be. Architects and designers hold that “form follows function,” and the same is true of writing. A lab report has a much different function than a resume, an academic journal article is very dissimilar from a narrative, and because of the differences of function, their forms are also different.

But just because form is variable, it doesn't mean that there are not general expectations as to what kind of form or organization a particular type of writing should have. The GWT requires you to write an essay in which you argue for a particular point of view. Because it is an essay, there are certain expectations that your readers have as to how it will be organized. One way to think of the organization of an essay is to think of it as an intellectual journey.

**Introduction:** Your introduction is like a signpost or a map at the beginning of a trail. It tells readers where you are going to take them, what ideas you will explore, and what they will see along the way. It should create a feeling of anticipation and interest. It should provide a broad context for your ideas, a strong thesis or focusing idea, and a brief summary of the points the essay will develop. Ask yourself:

- What is my main idea or thesis?
- Who are my readers? What do they know and believe?
- Why is my idea important here and now?
- How do I want my readers to respond?

**Body:** The body of the essay moves the reader along toward the destination or goal. It might have one paragraph, but usually it has several. Each paragraph is related to one of the points you want to show the readers along the way. Some points may take more than one paragraph to develop completely. There should be connections and transitions between the points you show the reader. Ask yourself:

- What is this paragraph about?
- What points do I want to make to help my readers understand my idea?
- What evidence do I have that each point is true?
- What examples can I use to help the reader understand each point?
- How can I keep the reader interested in following my ideas?
- What does this paragraph do for the reader?

**Conclusion:** The conclusion is the end of the journey. It looks back on the points you have shown the reader, and reinforces, but does not necessarily repeat, the main idea. It also should create a feeling of ending, a farewell to the reader. Ask yourself:

- How has the reader's mind been changed by following my points and examples?
- If we continued this journey, where would we go next?
- If the reader ignores the points you have made, what might happen?

### **Essay Form and Paragraphing**

Many high school students have learned a type of organization called the “five-paragraph essay.” While this type of essay does offer an organizational formula that can seem useful for a timed writing test, the “five-paragraph essay” can also be formulaic and simplistic. Often students try to force what they have to say into the constraints of five paragraphs; in other words, they allow the form (five paragraphs) to determine the content, instead of allowing the form to follow from the content.

For example, consider how you would organize an essay on the following topic:

GWT Practice Topic #29

#### **Is Appearance the Most Important Thing for Southern Californians?**

When people think of Southern California they think of glamorous actors and actresses, beautiful people lounging around the beach in bathing suits, fancy expensive cars, and trendy nightlife. Is appearance the most important thing for Southern Californians? A government survey says that Southern Californians spend more on housing, cars, clothes and grooming and less on books, alcohol and cigarettes than the rest of the country. "Usually clichés are based on some reality," said Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a social psychologist and management professor at the Claremont Graduate University. "The presentation of self through appearance is more important in Southern California . . . so these findings aren't really all that strange."

In a well-organized essay, answer the following question:

*Do you agree that Southern Californians are more concerned about appearance than people from other parts of the United States or in other parts of the world? Support your ideas with specific examples of people you know or have observed.*

One way to organize an essay on this topic would be to compare Southern Californians' attitudes about appearance with those of people from other parts of the country or world. Organized this way, your essay might have four paragraphs—an introduction, a paragraph about Southern Californians' attitudes, a paragraph about the attitudes of others, and a conclusion.

However, other ways of organizing this essay could be equally effective. Perhaps you decide that you want to compare Southern Californians with others in the four areas mentioned in the government survey above. In addition to an introduction and conclusion, you would write paragraphs about housing, cars, clothes, and grooming as indicators of attitudes about appearance, and your essay would be six paragraphs long.

So, contrary to what many students believe, there is no rule that says that a college essay, or any other kind of essay, must have five paragraphs and five paragraphs only. Paragraph divisions perform two functions: 1) they help the reader understand the text by organizing it into groups of ideas that work together, and 2) they help the eye return to the proper place in the text after looking away for a brief moment. A text without enough breaks is difficult to read because you keep losing your place.

Thus, paragraph divisions should simply help the reader read and understand the text. How many paragraphs you have depends on the nature of your ideas and how much you have to say. Organizing your essay is best accomplished by determining what you want to say and shaping the form of your essay accordingly. And who knows? You might find in the end that five paragraphs really works best for your content!

No matter how many paragraphs you use, avoid using formulaic organizational patterns. Here is an example based on an article by Lisa Takeuchi Cullen titled "Not Too Rich or Too Thin" (*Time*, June 7, 2004. <<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,994387,00.html>>). In this article, Cullen offers explanations for why the poor in America have higher rates of obesity than the rich. The left column shows her presentation; the right is an example of the same ideas presented less effectively.

	<b>Original article</b>	<b>Over-reliance on formulaic organization</b>
Topic sentence for body paragraph 1	"The cost of food—quality food—is perhaps the best place to start."	The first reason why poor people tend to be overweight is because unhealthy food is cheaper than healthy food.
Topic sentence(s) for body paragraph 2	"Processed foods aren't just cheap, tasty, and filling. They're also more accessible."	The second reason why obesity occurs more often in poor neighborhoods is because it's easier to purchase unhealthy food.
Topic sentence for body paragraph 3	"Children of the poor face especially steep odds in fighting obesity."	The final reason why the poor, especially children, are at high risk for obesity is that their communities have few resources to provide physical activities both in school and in the neighborhood.

Note that while the formulaic version on the right clearly identifies the writer's points, the repetitiveness reduces the effectiveness of the essay, making it rather tedious and too predictable.