

Organizing Your Ideas

Spending time during your prewriting stage to organize ideas can help you improve the flow of your writing and keep your writing focused on your thesis statement.

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, but the steps *between* getting ideas and drafting are essential.

Getting Started

There are two steps that come before organizing your ideas: gathering ideas and drafting a thesis statement.

Gathering 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.

Drafting a thesis statement: 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.

Consult the specific Learning Centre handouts and/or your assignment instructions from your instructor for more information.

Steps to Organizing Your Ideas

Once you have a sense of your draft 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.

Step 1: Select relevant ideas

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 2: Group your ideas

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:

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.

Working from a Cluster Map: 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?

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 as 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.

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.

Step 3: Expand ideas

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.

Step 4: Order your ideas

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.

Step 5: 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.

Step 6: 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.

The Result

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.