

## 2c Organizing ideas

An effective essay has a recognizable shape—an arrangement of parts that guides readers, helping them see how ideas and details relate to each other and contribute to the whole. You may sometimes let an effective organization emerge over one or more drafts. But many writers find that organizing ideas to some extent before drafting can provide a helpful sense of direction, as a map can help a driver negotiate a half-familiar system of roads. If you feel uncertain about the course your essay should follow or have a complicated topic with many parts, devising a shape for your material can clarify your options.

Before you begin organizing your material, look over all the writing you've done so far—freewriting, notes from reading, whatever. Either on paper or on a computer, pull together a master list of all the ideas and details you think you might want to include. You can add to or subtract from the list as you think about shape.

### 1 Distinguishing the general and the specific

To organize material for an essay, you need to distinguish general and specific ideas and see the relations between ideas. **General** and **specific** refer to the number of instances or objects included in a group signified by a word. The “ladder” below illustrates a general-to-specific hierarchy.

Most general

↑ life form  
 plant  
 flowering plant  
 rose  
 ↓ American Beauty rose  
 Uncle Dan's prize-winning American Beauty rose

Most specific

### 2 Choosing an organizing tool

Some writers view outlines as chores and straitjackets, but they need not be dull or confining. There are different kinds of outlines, some more flexible than others. All of them can enlarge and clarify your thinking, showing you patterns of general and specific, suggesting proportions, and highlighting gaps or overlaps in coverage.

Many writers use outlines not only before but also after drafting—to check the underlying structure of the draft when revising it (see p. 49). No matter when it's made, though, an outline can change to reflect changes in your thinking. View any outline you make as a tentative sketch, not as a fixed paint-by-numbers diagram.

A **scratch outline** lists the key points of the paper in the order they will be covered. Here is Sara Ling's scratch outline for her essay on Internet communication:

#### Thesis statement

By lowering the barriers of physical appearance, the unique anonymity of Internet communication could build diversity into community.

### Scratch outline

No fear of prejudgment

Physical attributes unknown—age, race, gender, etc.

We won't be shut out because of appearance

Inability to prejudge others

Assumptions based on appearance

Meeting of minds only

Finding shared interests and concerns

A **formal outline** can be more suitable for a more complex topics.

### Thesis statement

By lowering the barriers of physical appearance, the unique anonymity of Internet communication could build diversity into community.

### Formal outline

- I. No fear of being prejudged
  - A. Unknown physical attributes
    1. Gender
    2. Age
    3. Race
    4. Style
  - B. Freer communication
  - C. No automatic rejection
- II. Inability to prejudge others
  - A. No assumptions based on appearance
    1. Body type
    2. Physical disability
    3. Race
  - B. Discovery of shared interests and concerns
    1. Sports and other activities
    2. Family values
    3. Political views
  - C. Reduction of physical bias

## 3) Choosing a structure

Most essays share a basic shape: **introduction**, **body** and **conclusion**

### a) Introduction:

- Usually a paragraph or two.
- Draws the reader into the essay
- Clarifies the topic
- Usually ends with the thesis statement

### b) Body:

- Develops the thesis
- Its paragraphs develop the general points that support the thesis (each point usually takes up a paragraph or more)

### c) Conclusion:

- Contains the most important ideas – what the reader should remember
- Often also suggest future course of action

## 4) Linking paragraphs in the essay

a) Each paragraph should contribute to the thesis

b) Arrangement of the paragraphs should be clear and logical

c) Create links between paragraphs – repetition, restatement, connecting words, etc.

**EXERCISE 2.9 Organizing ideas**

The following list of ideas was extracted by a student from freewriting he did for a brief paper on soccer in the United States. Using his thesis statement as a guide, pick out the general ideas and arrange the relevant specific points under them. In some cases you may have to infer general ideas to cover specific points in the list. (You can do this exercise online at [ablongman.com/littlebrown](http://ablongman.com/littlebrown).)

**Thesis statement**

Despite increasing interest within the United States, soccer may never be the sport here that it is elsewhere because both the potential fans and the potential backers resist it.

**List of ideas**

Sports seasons are already too crowded for fans.

Soccer rules are confusing to Americans.

A lot of kids play soccer in school, but the game is still “foreign.”

Sports money goes where the money is.

Backers are wary of losing money on new ventures.

Fans have limited time to watch.

Fans have limited money to pay for sports.

Backers are concerned with TV contracts.

Previous attempts to start a pro soccer league failed.

TV contracts almost matter more than live audiences.

Failure of the US Football League was costly.

Baseball, football, hockey, and basketball seasons already overlap.

Soccer fans couldn't fill huge stadiums.

American soccer fans are too few for TV interest.