

Tips on Organizing Longer Pieces of Writing: A Hands-on Workshop

Monday March 28th, 2005: 5:30-7 pm, ETC 208

I. Revise for Your Reader: Clarifying Your Organization

A. Identify Your Introduction, Conclusion, and Main Point (for each chapter)

- a. Your reader must see three things easily and unambiguously:
 - i. where your introduction ends
 - ii. where your conclusion begins
 - iii. what sentences in both state your main claim
- b. Strategies for Clarifying the Parts of Your argument
- c. Readers must also see your main claim clearly, so be sure it's where they will look for it: **close to the end, if not at the end of your introduction** (if you stated it there) **and again in your conclusion, close to its beginning**. Be sure the main claim in your introduction is not just a "topic-announcing" sentence, such as *This report will discuss the development of stories about the Alamo*. It should state a main claim that answers your research question. (see the end of the handout for help identifying your main claim)

B. Make Sure the Body of Your Report is Coherent

- a. Check to be sure that readers can see these five things in the body of your chapters:
 - i. where each section and sub-section ends and the next begins
 - ii. what sentence in each section and sub-section states the main point
 - iii. how each section relates to the one before and after
 - iv. what concepts run through all the parts
 - v. how each section is relevant to your main claim
- b. Signals. To ensure that your readers will see those items, check for these signals:
 - i. The beginning and end of each section and sub-section are clearly marked
 - ii. The point of a section is at the end of a brief introduction to it.
 - iii. Each section begins with words signaling the order of parts
 - iv. Each section is relevant to your main claim
 - v. Readers can see the key concepts that run through the rest of your report

C. Check Your Paragraphs

- a. Paragraphs are like sections: each should have a sentence introducing it, and its point should usually be that sentence
- b. Aim for the Golden Mean: avoid Mammoth paragraphs and Micro Paragraphs

D. Let It Sit, Then Paraphrase

- a. **Have a buddy skim it. Read its introduction, the first paragraph of each section and subsection, and conclusion. Then based strictly on what they have read, have them paraphrase it for you. Does the paraphrase hang together? Does it fairly represent your argument? If not, you have some revising to do.** Take notes for yourself on what is missing from their paraphrase. Make sure they can tell you (1) What the common ground was (2) what the "but" was that previous readers/researchers have left out (3) the so what—why it matters that this previous analysis was missing (4) what your argument is (5) what your evidence is for that argument.

II. Writing Your Intro & Conclusion: See the longer handout for details!

III. Revise for Style.

A. **Tip #1 Focus on the First Eight or Nine Words of a Sentence.** The key to clear a sentence is in its first eight or nine words. When readers grasp those words easily, they read what follows faster, understand it better, and remember it longer. To create such sentences, follow these five principles:

- a. Avoid long introductory phrases and clauses.
- b. Make the subjects of your verbs short and concrete.
- c. Avoid interrupting subjects and verbs with long phrases and clauses.
- d. Express important actions not in nouns, but in verbs.
- e. Put old information at the beginning of a sentence, new at the end.
- f. Create a Context to Introduce New Technical Terms

All these principles add up to this: Get past a short, concrete, familiar subject to a specific verb quickly. See the longer handout for help on each of these or consult a writing tutor!

B. Tip #2: HAVE SOMEONE ELSE PROOF READ IT FOR YOU.

C. Tip #3 Learn from Your Returned Draft

- a. Generalize on Specific Comments
 - i. Look for a pattern of errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar. If you see one, you know what you have to do
 - ii. Look closely at judgments on your reasoning and organization. If your reader says your report is disorganized, work harder on organizing your next one.
- b. Ask Questions!

What is my Main Claim: to get started on your identifying your main argument, answer the following questions:

1. I am working on the topic of X (*stories about the Battle of the Alamo*),
2. because I want to find out Y (*why its story is part of our popular history*),
3. so that I can help others understand Z (*how such myths have shaped our national character*).

This handout is a summary of sections 8-10 & 12 of "Research and Its Reporting," by Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, & Joseph M. Williams.