

How to (Re)Organize Your Paper

So your professor says you have trouble with organization. You've read your paper like eighteen times now and have no idea what to change. Try any (or all) of these four simple revision exercises to get a handle on your paper's organization. For more in-depth help, come see us at the Writing Center.

Reorder your paragraphs

A paper might seem disorganized because its paragraphs aren't in the best order. Try this:

- Read each body paragraph (i.e. everything between the intro and conclusion), asking the question, "What's my main point?" Jot down that main point in the margin, next to the paragraph.
- If you've got a paragraph that doesn't seem to have a main idea, put a question mark by it. You can deal with it using the advice in exercise 2.
- Now, think about whether your paragraphs are in the order that makes the most sense. If not, jot down a new order on a piece of paper.

If your paper is about why the drinking age should be lowered to 21, your first list and your second list might look something like this:

1. Draft and voting age is 18
2. Stats on binge drinking and car wreck deaths
3. Will decrease binge drinking
4. Might decrease car accidents
5. Will be less expensive for colleges/police

Tighten and focus your paragraphs

Once you've got your paragraphs in the right order, you need to make sure each paragraph is as tight and focused as possible. Follow these three simple guidelines:

- The first sentence of a paragraph should state the paragraph's main idea. If any of your first sentences don't do that, write new ones.
- Every other sentence in a paragraph should relate to the first sentence. If a sentence doesn't seem to relate, delete it from your paper.
- If you've got a paragraph that doesn't seem to have a main point, underline the sentences within that paragraph that might fit into other paragraphs in your paper. Place the underlined sentences into their appropriate paragraphs, and delete the rest.

Polish up the introduction

Think of your introductory paragraph, especially your thesis statement, as a road map for your reader. This is where you tell him or her exactly what to expect in the rest of your paper. Try these two simple steps to make your introduction crystal clear:

- Make sure you've got a thesis statement. This should come towards the end of your first paragraph and state the main point of your paper. If you don't think you have one, check out [How to Write a Thesis Statement](#) for help.
- Make the last sentence of your thesis statement a list each of the things you're going to discuss in the same order as they will appear in your paper.

For example, the last two sentences of the "drinking age" paper might look like this:

"There are numerous practical and logical reasons for lowering the drinking age in the United States to eighteen. Though lowering the drinking age poses a slight risk of increased drunk driving fatalities (1), it will decrease the number of deaths caused by binge drinking (2), decrease costs for colleges and local police forces (3) and fairly grant adults who can already vote and be drafted into the military full rights of citizenship (4)."

See? Now your reader knows exactly what you're going to talk about, in exactly what order. Simple, huh?

Check your transitions

Every time you switch to a new topic in your paper, you need to let your reader know. To ensure you've done this, follow these two simple steps: Read your paper over. Mark in the margins each time you switch to a completely new topic. Make sure that the first sentence of each "new topic" paragraph includes a transitional phrase.

Here are some basic transitional phrases that might be used to signal a change in topic in the "drinking age" paper.

- **Another** important reason for lowering the drinking age is . . .
- **Although** the number of drunk driving deaths might increase . . .
- **In addition** to the basic concept of fairness, it is also important to remember that soldiers are under a great deal of stress . . .
- **As a result** of this flawed policy, binge drinking deaths have increased . . .