Writing Studio
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Finding your Flow with Connective Organization

Thompson Writing Program
DUKE UNIVERSITY

PART 1: UNDERSTANDING PRINCIPLES of FLOW:
Putting a finger on what exactly "flow" is can be surprisingly difficult. It can pertain to lower-order sentence level concerns like clarity, conciseness, cohesion, and coherence. It might also implicate transitions or internal paragraph structure. However, the highest-order influence on flow is often hidden in plain sight-- in *how* your thoughts around a topic are organized.

Defining Two Approaches to Organization
By the time you're in college, you've likely had plenty of practice breaking up a big idea (central claim) into smaller supporting ideas (paragraph topics). You know that the small ideas need to connect to the big one but, at least in high school, it often doesn't matter whether your paragraph topics clearly connect to *each other*. If your supporting ideas can work like items on a list that go in any order, you're probably approaching your topic by dividing it into **categories**, or using **categorical organization.**

University-level writing, on the other hand, demands that supporting ideas have more in common than shared itemhood on a list. Paragraphs should not only connect to the central claim; they should bear a clear, logical connection to each another. Looking for common features or characteristics that exist between categories can help you approach your topic using **conceptual** or **connective organization.**

Identifying Categorical and Connective Organization
Simply dividing up a big topic into categories can actually be a very helpful way of processing everything you've learned—and it can even be a great way to generate a first draft! However, your audience will likely follow connective organization more easily. To put these approaches to organization into context, take a look at the outlines below for two different papers on the same topic.

Central Claim: *In order to be healthier, we should eat more avocados than steak or donuts.*

Paper 1
I. Steak
-Molecular structure of fat found in steak.
-How steak fat is broken down in the body
-Long term health effects of steak fat

II. Donuts
-Molecular structure of fat found in donuts.
-How donut fat is broken down in the body
-Long term health effects of donut fat

III. Avocado
-Molecular structure of fat found in avocado.
-How avocado fat is broken down in the body
-Long term health effects of avocado fat

Paper 2
I. Molecular Structure of different types of fat
-Steak
-Donuts
-Avocado

II. How fats break down in the body
-Steak
-Donuts
-Avocado

III. Long term health effects of different fats
-Steak
-Donuts
-Avocado

Effects of Connective Organization
Paper 2 flows better because the supporting ideas build around concepts rather than categories. Grounding the essay in a conceptual organization allows the writer to establish a natural chain of logic that moves from cause to effect to solution. It also pulls the different categories (Method A, B, C) together as evidence in each paragraph—which helps the reader synthesize intricate details into a bigger, more holistic picture.

PART 2. ASSESSING YOUR OWN PAPER
Now that you're more familiar with the organizational qualities of a paper that flows logically, you can apply these principles to your own writing. First, reflect on your paper and/or on the feedback you've received to see if any of the "red flags" apply. If you're still unsure, try one or more of the exercises to assess your organization.

"Red Flags" for Categorical Organization
If it seems like your paper has any of the following characteristics, you may want to revise your organization strategy:

- Paragraph topics are descriptive rather than interpretive.
- Paper feels "chunky," "clunky," or fragmented
- A sense of "conversation" between sources is missing
- Although analysis is surface, short, or redundant, you find yourself thinking "there's nothing else I can possibly say!"
- An outside reader needs to read your paper more than once to understand the big picture
- Your reader has to remember increasing amounts of information or flip back at different points in the paper to make connections

Helpful Exercises:

1) Remember that categorical thinking produces list items that can work in any order. Write your central claim (minus any roadmap statements), and each supporting idea/topic on their own index cards. Shuffle the cards and pass them to a person who is unfamiliar with your essay. If they can put them in the "right" order and support that order along similar lines of logic, you've probably got a strong concept. If it the person scratches their head or takes a long time, chances are you can find an idea that unifies your thoughts more clearly.
2) Try to envision Categorical and Connective Organization at two ends of a spectrum. Identify where your current outline or draft lands on that spectrum, and where you would *like* it to land
3) While it would be impossible to make an exhaustive list of concepts to support connective thinking, an easy place to start is by contextualizing your work in a subject area. Every field generates its own perspectives, knowledge, and ideas. Within the context of your coursework, practice pinpointing the connective forces in lectures, readings, discussions, and peer essays. Keep a list of common themes and keywords.