

# RHETORICAL STRATEGIES & ORGANIZATION PATTERNS:

common, accepted English methods and structures of explaining, developing and organizing ideas

## BASIC TERMS & CONCEPTS: definitions & explanations

**Rhetoric:** The art of writing or speaking effectively in order to persuade an audience to accept an idea.

**Rhetorical Strategies/Modes/Techniques:** Refers to how a paragraph and/or essay is organized and the methods used to support and explain the main idea or thesis; in other words, the pattern of development used to make a point.

**Support:** Refers to the use of sufficient relevant evidence and explanation in an essay or paragraph to support the thesis and/or topic sentence—specifically, the inclusion of necessary information and explanations, consideration of opposing views and perspectives, interpretation and explanation of evidence, and connecting support directly to the main point.

**Development:** Refers to the process of adding informative and illustrative examples and details and using an appropriate pattern of organization to support the main idea in a paragraph or essay.

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## RHETORICAL STRATEGIES: definitions & explanations

**Illustration/Exemplification:** This strategy focuses on using specific examples—brief, specific examples (exemplification) and/or specific examples that are explained in great detail (illustrations)—to support a main idea.

**Narration:** This strategy focuses on the use of stories about you, people you know, people you’ve heard about, and/or hypothetical (imagined) that are relevant to a main idea and explain/demonstrate the point(s) you want to make.

**Description:** This strategy is often used with one or more of the previous two. Using description means focusing on the use of concrete, sensory diction (words) to describe a location, person, event, object, memory, etc. that explains or illuminates your main point and/or specific words rather than general or abstract words. “Concrete, sensory words” are words that can be perceived by our senses: sight, smell, taste, touch, and feel (such as *red, bright, rotten, pleasant, bitter, sweet, rough, soft*, etc.) and “specific words” refer to words that name or refer to precise people, places, and events (such as *Leah Keys Stahl, Toronto, the 2010 FIFA world championship game* as opposed to general words like *girl or woman, big city, and soccer game*).

**Cause & Effect:** These terms refer to reasons (causes) and results or consequences (effects). A writer may focus on just causes, just effects, or both by both *presenting and evaluating* the causes or reasons for something; the effects, results, or consequences of something; or both to explain a main idea.

**Compare & Contrast:** Writers use this strategy to show the similarities (comparison), differences (contrasting), or both among two or more things by first presenting the items of comparison and criteria or qualities being compared/contrasted, and then—depending on the type of organization pattern chosen—analyzing and/or explaining these in relation to a main idea.

**Process (Analysis):** This strategy focuses on giving instructions or giving the sequence of steps or stages of some kind of progressive action, concept, event, etc. For example, a process paper may explain or describe how to do, build, and/or accomplish something. Process paragraphs and essays present each step/stage separately in order from first to last. Sometimes analysis of each step/stage is necessary, which is why this strategy is sometimes called “process analysis.”

**Classification:** This strategy is used to divide, group, or categorize information according to specified topics, which are the explained in detail one by one and organized in a way that best represents and supports a main idea.

**(Extended) Definition:** Writers use extended definition when the use and understanding of a specific use of a word, term, or concept is the central idea (main point) of a paragraph or essay. This strategy is used to provide detailed definitions and meanings that are essential to a main idea, including unfamiliar words; abstractions; discipline-specific vocabulary; words or terms a writer wishes to redefine in a new, original, unique way; and distinguishing *connotative meanings* (popularly used and understood) from *denotative meanings* (dictionary meanings). Writers use this strategy when the readers’ understanding of the meaning of a particular word, term, phrase, or expression is crucial to the purpose (main point, thesis) of the text and/or is the writer’s main point in the text.

**Refutation:** The verb to refute means “to argue against.” Writers use refutation for a number of reasons to recognize, explain, and describe one or more opposing arguments/positions/views on a subject for the purpose of exposing flaws and proving that their argument or position is the strongest and most valid. Presenting counterarguments also helps writers to improve their ethos by demonstrating their knowledge and fairness.

**Argumentation:** This is sort of a catch-all category in which writers may use one or many of the strategies described above to help him/her *argue a position on a controversial issue*. Controversy is the key to using this argument strategy well: argumentation means that you study a controversial topic about which people strongly disagree (such as abortion, legalizing gay marriage, medical marijuana, etc.), pick a side (usually for or against), and then present your argument, hopefully in a way that is more convincing than arguments on the opposing side of the issue, NOT by saying that the other side is all wrong, bad, or stupid but instead presenting *why your argument is stronger* than the opposition.

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## PATTERNS OF ORGANIZATION: common combinations & order in English compositions

Some of these are specific to certain strategies while others may be used to logically order ideas expressed using a variety of strategies defined above. I have outlined the strategy-specific organization patterns first; following these are the other organizational patterns, many of which will work in a variety of situations and with several different rhetorical strategies and/or combination of strategies.

### STRATEGY-SPECIFIC ORGANIZATION PATTERNS

**Cause & Effect Order:** The causes or reasons are usually presented first and followed by the results, effects, or consequences; however, a writer may focus on just causes or just effects (not necessarily both), in which case he/she must use another pattern of organization.

**Compare & Contrast Orders:** Compare & Contrast—BLOCK STYLE: Used to analyze or explain similarities or differences by focusing on explain the items being compared or contrasting, explaining the qualities or criteria of each item fully before moving on to the next item being compared. For example, if I was comparing the price and quality of Domino’s and Caesar’s pizza using block style, I would first discuss the *price and quality of Domino’s* in a single paragraph, and then I would discuss the *price and quality of Caesar’s* in the next paragraph.

Compare & Contrast—POINT-BY-POINT STYLE: This method of organization focuses of the criteria (or points) of comparison or contrast instead of the items being compared or contrasted. Using this style and the example above, I would first explain the similarities or differences of the *price* of Domino’s vs. Caesar’s in one paragraph, and then—in a second, new paragraph—move on to discuss the *quality* of Domino’s vs. Caesar’s.

**Process Order:** When writing a process paper, we use *sequential order*, which details the sequence of events or actions (steps or stages of a process) to explain or give instructions about how to do, make, accomplish (etc.) something in particular by beginning with the first step and moving on logically to the next steps toward the final step.

**Classification Order:** This is also sometimes called *topical order* because classifying means to divide ideas up into distinct and separate *topics* (groups or classes) and then explain each topic, group, or class individually and in detail. Topics may be ordered in any way that best suits the writer’s purpose (see some of these ordering patterns below under “Other Patterns”).

**Definition Order:** When using definition, the key word, term, phrase, concept or expression is usually presented first, followed closely by its standard, traditional, most accepted, and/or dictionary meaning. This basic definition is then followed by a detailed explanation of the writer’s alternative, new, original, unique, and/or connotative definition as well as a discussion of how and why this word, term, phrase, concept, or expression is a central part of the main idea of the text (thesis).

**Refutation Order:** In this pattern, which is also called *order of opposing arguments*, the opposing view or counterargument (one or more) is usually presented *first* and then followed by an equally or more detailed explanation of the writer’s main idea/perspective in a way that highlights the flaws in the opposition and attempts to prove the truth, probability, and/or reasons why the writer’s view is stronger and more valid.

### OTHER ORGANIZATION PATTERNS—ones that work with various strategies and combinations of strategies

**Order of Importance or Climax:** Using this pattern, information can be organized in one of two ways: (1) from least to most important idea (standard) or (2) from most to least important idea (reverse).

**Order of Generalization & Example (also called Statement & Clarification Order):** This pattern may be used with most if not all rhetorical approaches in which combining a statement/generalization with specific details as support is the most logical. There are two structures possible: statement/generalization followed by detailed support, called *inductive approach or reasoning*, or the reverse order of details presented first and then followed by a statement/generalization, also called *deductive approach or reasoning*.

**Chronological Order:** A structure that focuses on describing and explaining the *order of time* in which events occur, from first to last or beginning to end. Often used with the strategies of process or description.

**Spatial Order:** This type of organization is usually used with description or narration but may be used with other strategies. Spatial order focuses on order of space—moving from one location in a continuous and sequential manner, such as a description of a room that begins at the door, moves clockwise around the room (describing everything along the way), and ends where it began.

**Problem-to-Solution Order:** First a problem is presented in a detailed manner along with the causes that have led up to the problem. This is followed by a detailed explanation of a solution to the problem. This organization pattern is appropriate for many strategies such as refutation, cause & effect, process, and classification.

**Order of Familiarity:** Ideas or points are ordered from the most to least or least to most familiar—or, in other words, from the ideas or points most widely known or recognized by the audience or in the reverse order, from the least to know widely known and recognized.

**Order of Frequency:** Used when dealing with how often something occurs, from most to least frequently occurring or in the reverse order, from the least to most frequently occurring.

**Order of Complexity:** An order in which the points or ideas are presented from the most simple ones to the most complicated ones or in the reverse order, from the most complicated ones to the most simple and easy to understand.

**Order of Audience Awareness or Audience Acceptance:** This pattern focuses on ideas or points that the audience is *most to least* or *least to most* likely to be aware of and comfortable with. For example, Americans are familiar with democracy and capitalism and believe in these ideals, so they are more comfortable with, aware and accepting of these political systems; however, Americans know little about other systems, such as European socialist democracy or communism, so Americans are the least at ease with, accepting and/or aware of these other systems because of their knowledge and understanding of other systems is lacking.

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## EXAMPLE PARAGRAPHS: written examples demonstrating strategies & patterns

### **Cause & Effect / Cause & Effect Order**

Because toys have become electronic devices, some children today are unable to entertain themselves. Gone are the days when children invented their own adventures and used sticks as swords, cookie sheets as armor, and refrigerator boxes as fortresses to defend. The electronic age has delivered children all sorts of gadgets and gizmos that stifle a child's creativity during play because of pre-imagined and limited functions and uses—some modern toys even have buttons to activate recorded messages of scripted, monotonous "adventures" that leave no room for a child to fill in the details. Something has been lost amidst the advent of modern technology: the precious and priceless ability of a child to transform any old object by the simple power of imagination. With no imagination, it is no wonder some children today have short attention spans.

1. *What are the causes (reasons) the writer presents?*
2. *What are the effects (results/consequences)?*

### **Compare & Contrast Order: Block Style**

As a child, I thought my parents were ignorant and out of touch with reality. They couldn't possibly understand anything I thought or felt. When they weren't annoying me with their ridiculous lectures, or grounding me for minor infractions of the rules, they were embarrassing me in public. Now, as a parent myself, I find it frustrating that my children think I have no clue about their lives, even though I understand perfectly well what they are thinking or feeling. I find myself giving my children the

same lectures I once thought were ridiculous. My children cannot seem to follow the rules their father and I have set, and they are continuously embarrassing me in public. My, how things have changed.

1. *What quality is being compared in this paragraph?*
2. *Who is the writer comparing in this paragraph?*

### **Compare & Contrast Order: Point-by-Point Style**

Although they are sisters, Jennifer and Jessica are complete opposites. Jennifer enjoys playing sports while Jessica would rather watch. Jennifer has no interest in playing a musical instrument, but Jessica is the first chair violinist. Jennifer listens to new age music; Jessica prefers country music. Jennifer's favorite subject is English; conversely, Jessica's favorite is math. Jennifer likes to curl up in a chair on a rainy day and read a good book while Jessica would rather sleep all day. No one would ever guess that they are actually twins.

1. *Who are the two people being compared in this paragraph?*
2. *What are the "points" of comparison between the two subjects?*

### **Refutation (Opposing Arguments) Order**

*[The topic here is Reiki, a natural method of healing in which healers claim to transfer healing energy, called ki, through the palms of the hands.]*

Opponents of alternative healing methods such as Reiki claim that serious illnesses such as HIV/AIDS and cancer cannot be treated without drugs. Opponents think so because HIV/AIDS and cancer patients often spend the rest of their lives in the hospital taking medicine. However, it is actually common knowledge that, except for cases in which the cancer is diagnosed at an early stage, drugs also cannot treat AIDS or cancer; instead, drugs can only ease pain and suffering caused by other treatments patients must undergo such as chemotherapy. Instead of drugs, which are expensive and have many side effects, an individual can use his/her energy to overcome the hardships of life, find emotional balance, leave the stress of his/her illness and everyday life, and let go of the haunting worries. Most chronic conditions such as eczema or migraines are known to be caused by things like poor diet and stress, and deep-rooted anger and other strong emotions can contribute to viral infections. Since balancing our emotions and controlling our thoughts are very important for our overall well-being, we should consider that Reiki can help us avoid illnesses and improve our lives in areas that traditional medicines cannot.

1. *What is the writer arguing for in this paragraph? What is he/she arguing against (the counterargument)?*
2. *How would you describe the writer's presentation of both views on the topic? (Angrily, incompletely, fair, etc.?)*

### **(Extended) Definition Order:**

I'm a teacher, but not in the traditional sense of the word. T E A C H E R: the word no longer feels as awkward rolling off my tongue and flowing from my fingertips as it once did. A fellow teacher and friend remarked one day during my first semester teaching that she didn't feel old or smart enough to be a "real" teacher. I still think of this at times and remember how I used to worry that my students would discover my deepest, darkest secret: that I really wasn't all that old or smart, I didn't have all the answers, I was still trying to just figure all this writing stuff out too, I was no "expert," and, really, I simply loved language and to write. Slowly but happily, I discovered this was all it took to be a teacher. Truly loving and always wanting to know more about a subject are the only important qualifications a teacher needs in relation to her subject. Labels like *expert*, *scholar*, *authority*, and even more playful ones like *guru* or *champion* are grossly inept because they all suggest that a person can somehow achieve, overcome, or conquer knowledge. What a preposterous, pretentious notion considering that we'd still be trying to bash open walnuts with rocks and make square wheels turn if our Neanderthal ancestors had one day decided that they had learned all there was to know in the world. There are instead so many more humble, honest, and apt terms that capture what a teacher is and does: adventurer, watcher, dreamer, analyst, risk-taker, catalyst, seeker, builder, enthusiast—to name just a few. I have come to believe that a true teacher cannot ever "master" a subject (and those who think they can are likely the most dreadful bores you've ever had). For authentic, sincere teachers, there is no prize at the end of the race because *there is no race* in the first place. There is only the energy, motivation, and desire to run, discover, never stop chasing it down.

1. *What word or term is the writer redefining in this paragraph?*
2. *What is the writer's new definition of this word/term?*

### **Order of Importance or Climax: Standard Style (Least to Most)**

My encounter with nature became a learning experience for me. I learned to come prepared for anything. Our canoe overturning was proof that anything could happen. All of our supplies were gone. I also learned that although nature is beautiful, she can also be deadly. If it hadn't been for the cave we discovered in the moonlight, the hail storm surely would have killed us. Most of all, I learned to trust my mother. I never thought I would say this, but she does know a thing or two. She kept her wits about her and kept me calm as well. Even in the middle of nowhere without any supplies, she still managed to take care of me. Her grandfather had taught her how to survive in the wild, and she hadn't forgotten a thing.

1. *What is the writer ranking (assigning degrees of importance to) in this paragraph?*
2. *List the writer's ideas in the same order of importance as the writer has presented them.*

### **Order of Importance or Climax: Reverse Style (Most to Least)**

A plan to improve the city's park was approved Monday night by the city council. The plan involves adding landscaping to the north end, rebuilding the bridge over the lake, and updating the playground equipment. Funds for the project have been donated by local businesses who hope that improving the park will bring more people to the downtown area which will in turn bring more customers. The next order of business is for the city council to open the bidding process for the various improvements. After bids are accepted by the council, the massive overhaul and construction project that will eventually transform the city's downtown area can finally begin.

1. *What is the writer ranking (assigning degrees of importance to) in this paragraph?*
2. *List the writer's ideas in the same order of importance as the writer has presented them.*

### **Generalization & Example (Statement & Clarification) Order**

A quick tour through my house will convince you that I am an extremely messy person—even a slob. Starting in my bedroom, you will see clothes tossed around as if thieves had just looted the place. T-shirts dangle from door knobs, socks sit balled up on top of the dresser, and blue jeans cover the floor like a drop cloth. A trail of shoes and sneakers leads you out of the bedroom and into the bathroom. There you will stand on a sopping towel and see a blow-dryer and a copy of Newsweek lying on the sink alongside an uncapped tube of Crest. Just behind you is the towel rack: no towel, naturally, just a dripping shirt and a crusty old bathrobe belt. Next to the bathroom is the kitchen—slob headquarters. To the left are erupting bags of garbage, a bald tire, and a tall stack of yellow newspapers. To the right you'll notice a greasy oven stacked high with pots and—beside it—a sink full of gray water and dirty dishes. Considering all the items you must hop over, step on, and avoid altogether, touring my house is more like completing an obstacle course than a casual stroll from room to room.

1. *What is the generalization in this paragraph?*
2. *The writer uses a distinct rhetorical strategy to develop this paragraph. What is it?*

### **Classification (Topical) Order**

There are four basic kinds of writing: each mode may take different forms but has a primary purpose. The first is expository writing, which has a purpose of explaining something or giving directions, such as providing directions to your house. The second mode is persuasive writing, which has a purpose of influencing the reader's way of thinking. A politician's speech is an example of persuasive writing. The third mode is descriptive writing, which has a purpose of providing vivid details so that the reader can picture what is being presented. An essay that depicts the glorious Grand Canyon fits into this category. The fourth mode is narrative writing, which has a purpose of presenting an experience in the form of a story. A personal account of a vacation is an example of narrative writing. Through these four modes, or combinations of modes, writers have several options for expressing their ideas.

1. *What categories does the writer break the content of the paragraph into?*
2. *Why do you think the writer put the topics in this particular order? What purpose might the writer have for ordering his points this way?*

### **Chronological (Time) Order**

It seemed like an ordinary day when she got up that morning, but Lynda was about to embark on the worst day of her life. First, she fell in the bathtub because her mother forgot to rinse out the bath oil. Then Lynda spilled orange juice on the outfit she had spent hours putting together for her school pictures. When she changed, she messed up the French braid her mother had put in her hair. She dropped all of her school books as she walked out the door and her math homework flew away in the wind. Once she made it to the car, she thought everything would be all right. She was wrong: her father didn't look before he

backed out of the driveway and ran into the neighbor's truck. Lynda's side of the car was damaged the most, and she ended up with a broken arm. That night, she cried herself to sleep.

1. *Is there a topic sentence in this paragraph? What about a concluding sentence? What's the main idea?*
2. *Are all of the details in the paragraph relevant? Why or why not?*

### **Problem-to-Solution Order:**

Several students receive poor grades on writing assignments, not because they lack the ability to communicate but because they cannot seem to manage their time when it comes to a large project. They do not know where to begin and therefore put things off until the last minute. To solve this problem, students need to develop a timeline for completing the project. If they divide the assignment into manageable "chunks" or parts and then set a schedule for completing each part, they will be able to finish the entire project before the deadline. Without the pressure of not knowing where to begin, the students will be able to focus on the assignment and communicate their ideas effectively.

1. *What is the problem presented in the paragraph? What is the solution?*
2. *What rhetorical strategy does the writer use to develop his/her idea?*

### **Spatial Order**

I couldn't believe my eyes when we finally emerged from the storm shelter. Where the barn once stood there was now only a few tufts of hay, the path that led to the house was scattered with branches and debris, and the entire roof of the house was gone. The north wall was caved in and we could see right into the house—what was left of it. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I noticed that most of our belongings had been sucked up into the great vacuum and scattered across the countryside. We heard a loud cracking and moaning as the west wall gave way and collapsed, sending up a wave of dust. And yet, there in the middle of the front yard was mother's prized rose bush, swaying in the breeze as if nothing had happened. Seeing it made me realize how lucky we were to be alive. We stood there in dismay, our arms locked around one another.

1. *This is a paragraph without a clear topic sentence. What, then, is the main idea? How do you know?*
2. *What rhetorical strategies does the writer use to develop the idea? Name more than one.*

### **Sequential Order**

The first step in redesigning your closet is to take everything out and sort through it. Anything you haven't worn in over a year should be given to charity. Check garments for wear and tear and take care of anything that needs mending. If it is beyond repair, get rid of it. The second step is to install a closet organizer. Choose one that will hold the different types of garments in your wardrobe. The third step is to put items in the closet so that those you wear most often are easy to access. The final step is to stay organized. Put garments back in their appropriate places so that you will be able to find them.

1. *This is another paragraph without a clear topic sentence. Is there a main idea? What is it? How do you know?*
2. *How would you describe the "flow" of this paragraph? Is it smooth, easy to read? Why or why not?*

### **Order of Familiarity**

African-Americans know what it is like to be underestimated because of the color of their skin. For example, a black person who communicates with others using in Standard English are often praised unduly for how well they speak. This is also an occurrence too often experienced by Asian-Americans as well, including those born and bred in the U.S.A. And black folk know what it is like to be feared, pitied, admired, and scorned simply on account of our race before we even have a chance to "boo!" We, in turn, view white people through the prism of our own race based expectations. I honestly am surprised every time I see a white man who can play basketball above the rim, just as Puerto Ricans and Cubans tend to be surprised to discover "Americans" who salsa truly well. All of which is to say that the notion that every individual is judged solely on personal merit, without regard for sociological wrapping, is mythical at best.

1. *What is the main idea of this paragraph? Where is it? How do you know?*
2. *What rhetorical strategies does the writer use to develop his/her ideas?*

### **Order of Frequency, Order of Complexity, Order of Audience Awareness or Audience Acceptance**

These are most often used at the essay (not paragraph) level because the ideas are often too complex to combine within single paragraphs.