Structuring a Paper

Looking to the text for inspiration

Most texts (both stories and arguments) have a beginning, a middle, and an end. In the case of stories, there should be a turning point where the characters or the situation undergo some critical change. Since the turning point is the crux of the story, it is a good place to structure your paper around. By asking some questions about this scene, you can get a wholistic idea of the story and its significance. By analyzing these three questions in your paper, your argument will also have a beginning, middle, and end.

* Why did this change occur (what event triggered it)?
* What changed (the character’s views on \_\_\_, the state of the world)?
* What resulted from this change (what events followed it)?

While a beginning, middle, and end may seem like a strange way to describe a philosophical text, they often have elements of this structure. Most argumentative texts start with some premises and choose to address a specific problem at the onset of the text. From there, they develop their argument with a series of points which are supported by examples. Often, their arguments are explained through a central example that their whole view hinges on, much like the turning point in a story. Finally, using their example, the philosopher is then able to make several conclusions. Using the same questions from above, you can structure your argument around how the philosopher develops theirs. Start by identifying the centerpiece of the text, and then consider its significance.

* Where did the philosopher begin (what was the problem they started with, what question were they trying to answer)?
* How did they go about addressing their topic?
* What conclusions did they draw?

Often, papers are missing prominent portions of a text. For example, a paper will address the moment when a character changes and how a story ends but will completely neglect the beginning of the text which lays all the groundwork that makes the end significant. Similarly, when analyzing a philosopher’s argument, it is important to follow the same progression that the author goes through in order to keep your own analysis coherent and logical. An excellent paper addresses the most important parts of the text it is analyzing. This approach incorporates those key points into the formation of your thesis, so that our whole paper is built around them, rather than needing to add them as examples later.

Moreover, this approach can solve many issues that arise in the formation of a thesis, such as having difficulties identifying contrasts between two texts that seem too similar or vice-versa. In many cases, texts are similar in at least one of these three areas, but are also different in one of the other two. Analyzing the reasons for these similarities and differences makes for an interesting thesis. For example, why do two texts that start in similar places end up with very different conclusions, or how do two characters go through similar experiences but respond differently?