

When It's Best to Be Explicit: Using Advance Organizers to Structure Your Argument

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“Writing is the process of making that which is implicit, explicit.” —Joseph Williams, *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*, 4th Edition

Writing style is different across cultures and over time, and Western technical writing has specific conventions that readers expect when they begin reading a manuscript. One of these expectations is the use of *advance organizers*, which are structural elements that writers use to help guide their readers to easily understand (and be persuaded by) their argument. This short article works on the macro- or argument-level of a manuscript to outline what an advance organizer is, when one should be used, and why you want to use them.

What is an advance organizer?

To elaborate on the brief definition of an advance organizer presented above, an *advance organizer* is a structural device that can be strategically used at different points in a manuscript to help “move an argument forward” and to aid the reader in easily navigating an argument. There are several different types of advance organizers, i.e., paragraph-level organizers are (1) the topic sentence, (2) supporting evidence, and (3) the concluding statement. This paragraph has an example of each of these devices embedded in it, with (1) the topic sentence beginning with “To elaborate...,” (2) the supporting evidence being the

sentences following, and (3) the concluding sentence being the sentence that follows this one. Below are several examples of advance organizers that writers use throughout the various parts of the paper, not just the paragraphs.

This article focuses on advance organizers applied at the section and manuscript levels. For instance, in a humanities manuscript, the accepted convention is to use a thesis statement as the primary advance organizer to guide how the rest of the manuscript is composed, and an effective thesis suggests the essay's **direction** (the opinion of the author), **emphasis** (the reasons and evidence the author will use to defend that opinion) and **scope** (the delimitations of the study or those things the author will and will not discuss). Put more simply, the thesis serves as a *mini-outline* for the rest of the manuscript, and using a clear thesis helps make the implicit structure of your argument more explicit for the reader. **Figure 1** presents a clear thesis statement and how the author would then structure the manuscript to build on each of these points stated in the thesis.

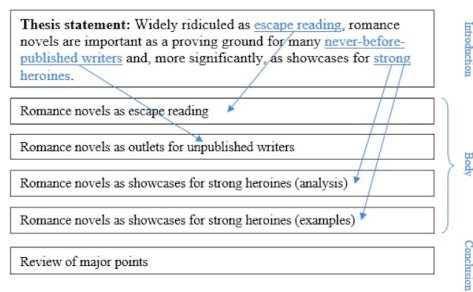


Figure 1. Structure of a humanities paper based on a clear thesis statement. Note that each block in the Body of the paper would contain several paragraphs, so these can be indicated as sections (adapted from The Wadsworth Handbook, 9th Edition, Laurie Kirsznner & Stephen Mandell, 2011, 42).

The statement of a clear thesis sets up the paper to carry the reader through the argument in a deliberate and organized manner. These “macro-level” organizers have specific placements throughout the manuscript, and the next section outlines where a reader might expect to find them.

When should I use advance organizers?

The position of advance organizers should be simple for your reader to understand, and writers will typically use them in three main places throughout the paper: the end of the introduction, the beginning of a section, and the beginning of each paragraph; and the first one we'll look at here is the thesis, followed by section leads, and topic sentences.

The thesis has a number of different names depending on the area of study and can come in the form of a “purpose” or “problem” statement (e.g., “This paper aims to ...”), a research question, or a “thesis statement.” The differences between the various types of advance

organizers is strictly due to the conventions of a particular field and whether the field prefers papers to be presented inductively (i.e., arguing from the presentation of evidence) or deductively (i.e., arguing from the presentation of a hypothesis). Most fields prefer the latter, and all papers will go between arguing inductively and deductively, depending on what is most appropriate for the proper development of the argument.

In scientific writing, most journals prefer (or require) their authors to write using sections, which help readers easily organize the manuscript into blocks of ideas; but you should also try to provide your reader with section leads in the first sentence or paragraph of each section. These section leads typically fall in between conventional headings such as Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion; and some style manuals (see the APA Publication Manual and AMA Manual of Style) specify acceptable headings that are expected to be able to establish validity for measures. Explicitly providing sign posts for your reader will build trust that you are trying to be clear and precise about what it was you did during your experiment or study and how you obtained the results you obtained. In addition, clearly explaining the way you have organized each section will allow you to present your results logically, making your interpretation of those results (in the Discussion) more acceptable to a skeptical reader (This is especially important when writing on controversial topics). Thus, using section leads is a good way to engage your reader and to help carry your reader through the manuscript efficiently and in a convincing manner.

Finally, you should use topic sentences for every paragraph you write, and these topic sentences should be directly related to the sub-points you want to make for each section (see post on writing paragraphs). To provide an example, take a look quickly at how this section of this article is structured. You should be able to identify the section header (this section is titled “What is an advance organizer?”), the section lead (“... the first one we look at is the thesis, followed by section leads, and topic sentences”), and the topic sentences for each paragraph (a bold word has been used for each major point to help identify them). The topic sentence performs a similar function as the section lead, only on a smaller scale (i.e., the paragraph level).

If you are not able to highlight or underline these key points while reading through a technical journal article, the author has not done a good enough job of clearly outlining his or her argument for the reader.

Why should I use advance organizers?

When we write (whether we realize it or not), we're composing arguments for our position. We build these arguments upon certain foundational concepts and assumptions that, when we state these explicitly, make our arguments more convincing. Additionally, to help convince our readers of our positions, we want them to be able to move quickly through the essay,

chapter, or book that we're writing; thus, writing clearly enough is essential so as to not frustrate our reader or appear to be trying to hide something. Finally, these parts of our arguments should easily flow from one point to the next.

This process of making the argument “fit together” is called cohesion. Cohesion is the writing principle that binds the overall argument together, from the thesis or purpose statement, to the section leads, to the topic sentences of each paragraph. A cohesive manuscript carries the reader through the author's context and into the immediate topic of the paper, stating how that topic fits into the larger conversation in the academic community. Cohesive writers break down the topic on which they are writing into constituent parts, and they then seek out appropriate tools to gather evidence. Finally, they allow those data to guide their interpretations and to formulate new hypotheses. Most importantly, writers use the above-described advance organizers as sign posts to help readers easily navigate the manuscript, with the ultimate goal of presenting a clear, uniform argument. This can be especially difficult when writing in groups, where different authors may contribute to different sections of the paper.

In conclusion, using advance organizers can help at both the macro-level of the entire paper and the micro-level of the individual paragraph. Each paragraph should be cohesive within itself to defend sufficiently the topic sentence (stated at the beginning of the paragraph). Each paragraph should build within the context of a section to defend the section lead (stated at the beginning of the section). Finally, each section should serve to defend the entire argument of the paper, chapter, or book that you're writing, and the argument that you are composing should be clearly stated at the beginning of the written work. Taking this article as an example, to bring cohesion to the written piece, it is a good practice to restate the purpose or position of the paper again at the end but in a way that concludes the paper, as exemplified in the first sentence of this paragraph.

We wish you the best of luck in your research and in clearly presenting your research to your community. For more on writing at the micro-level, please read the following article on the structure of the paragraph. Happy writing!

Contributors



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Writing a manuscriptAuthor ResourcesTranslationOrganizationSentence and paragraph structure

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