ORGANIZING YOUR IDEAS

Organizing your ideas occurs throughout the writing process:

- Thesis Statement and/or Statement of Purpose
- Preliminary Outline
- Revised Preliminary Outline (during research)
- Organizing Research Notes
- Thesis Statement and/or Introduction
- "Formal" Outline
- Revised "Formal" Outline (during writing)

What an outline is NOT:

- Static
- Formal/rigid format
- Only done if required by professor

What an outline IS:

- Dynamic and flexible
- A format that works for you
- A tool to help you organize your ideas
- A guide as you write

Thesis Statement and/or Statement of Purpose

- Prior to your in-depth research, you should develop a thesis statement and/or a statement of purpose. These help you focus your topic and guide your research. This is your first step in organizing your ideas.

- While the thesis statement is usually a single sentence, the statement of purpose is a full paragraph describing what you plan to do (e.g., "In this paper I will. . . ").

Preliminary Outline

- After developing your thesis and/or statement of purpose and before you begin your in-depth research, develop a preliminary outline. The preliminary outline is a simple list of subtopics that you intend to discuss in your paper.

- The items in your preliminary outline should also correlate to the topics you intend to research. As you conduct your research, use the subtopics listed in your preliminary outline to organize your notes (i.e., the subtopics are the headings on your note cards).

- Remember, your outline is dynamic and should be adjusted during your research as you learn more about the topic and refine your thesis. You may need to add, delete, or redefine subtopics. Ideally, you will have several "drafts" or "versions" of your outline as you acquire new knowledge and insights.
Organizing Research Notes

- After you have completed the bulk of your research, you will be faced with a large amount of information. To help you organize your notes, use your preliminary outline (updated throughout your research) as a guide. If you are using note cards, separate them into groups based on the subtopics you have listed. By organizing your research notes in this way, you are able to manage a large amount of information as you develop your “formal” outline and write your paper.

Thesis Statement and/or Introduction

- After you have organized your notes, you should refine your thesis statement to articulate the topic of your paper or what you will prove in the paper. The thesis statement then becomes an organizing tool as you write. If you find that parts of your paper do not support or relate to your thesis, you need to either adjust your thesis or eliminate the unrelated parts of your paper.

- You may also choose at this point to draft the introduction to your paper. The introduction includes your thesis as well as the major subtopics and therefore gives an overview of your paper. The introduction can be a useful tool to help you organize your ideas and can be used as a guide for writing.

"Formal" Outline

- Before you begin writing the body of your paper you will want to organize and plan the structure of your paper. The most common tool used is the "formal" outline but it is important to use an organizing system or outline format that works for you. The goal of an outline is to help ensure that you include all of the information necessary to support your thesis and that you present the information in a logical sequence.

- Outlines can range from simple listings to the more traditional that use roman numerals and various levels of subdivisions. Outlines can also range from using simple phrases to using complete sentences or small paragraphs. Other methods of organizing your paper may include flowcharting or bubble diagrams.

As you develop your detailed outline you should organize minor subtopics within major subtopics and identify the relationships between the major subtopics. By doing this you will be able to shape your paper into a sequence that most effectively presents your ideas and the information you have gathered. In order to find the best shape for your paper, you will often need to consider different structures and rearrange sections of your outline.
Revising the "Formal" Outline

As an organizing tool, it is important that you allow your outline to change as your ideas develop and as you gather new information. Thus, as you write your rough draft you may need to adjust the structure of your paper to accommodate new research. Or you may discover a more effective sequence for presenting your major subtopics. By revising your outline as these changes arise you will ensure that the overall shape of your paper remains intact. However, remember that your outline or other organizing method is YOUR tool and does not need to exactly represent the final shape your paper takes.

"Your list or outline is your attempt to impose form on the chaos of material that continually exerts its own power. From the tension between form and raw material, your paper takes shape” (Johnson 152).

SOURCES: