ProQuest Research Companion

How to Organize My Argument

# Beyond the five-paragraph essay

You've settled on a thesis statement, so now you're ready to start writing your paper, right? Not quite.

Chances are you have experience writing short papers with a simple five-paragraph structure: an introductory paragraph ending with a thesis statement, three paragraphs explaining each element of the thesis statement, and a one-paragraph conclusion. You probably didn't have to spend much mental energy on organization. That won't be true for longer and more scholarly papers, where you'll be writing way more than five paragraphs and you'll need to go beyond the very simple and formulaic five-paragraph structure.

Instructors will often require you to turn in an outline before you start writing. But even if they don't, it's a good idea to create one. It's easier to make good decisions about organization when you're creating an outline than after you've written a complete draft. Think about it: it takes less work to move around bullet points than it does to move around entire sections and paragraphs.

Although there is no precise formula for organizing your argument, all good research papers will probably contain the following six basic elements:

* introduction (including thesis statement)
* context
* definitions
* subclaims and evidence
* refutation of counterarguments
* conclusion

# Two Audiences

Before discussing each of these basic elements in more detail, we need to make a general point about organization: it should never occur in a vacuum. You should always think about organization in terms of what your audience is going to find persuasive.

But just who *is* your audience? Are we referring to the people who will actually be reading your paper or to a hypothetical group of readers who have the background and skills to understand, and have an interest in, your argument?

The short answer is both.

Let's start with the people who will actually read your paper—your *literal* audience. Though classmates, family members, and friends might read drafts of your paper, there's a good chance the only person who'll read your final draft is your instructor.

So throughout the research and writing process, it's worth thinking about what the most important member of your literal audience—your instructor—expects. Instructors have typically devoted a lot of time and energy to studying and teaching writing, and along the way, they've probably developed preferences for particular kinds of organization. So listen for these preferences, and do what you can to implement them.

But don't stop there. You'll also need to consider the preferences of another audience: your *implied* audience. Your ***implied audience*** will often be synonymous with scholars in the field you're doing research in. But not always. Sometimes, your implied audience will also include local politicians, citizens' groups, or other decision makers who can enact or lobby for some kind of change. Either way, you should always assume your implied audience is made up of smart, knowledgeable, and informed readers who have an active interest in what you're writing about.

Realistically, few, if any, members of your implied audience will end up reading your paper. But even so, they're the ones you should be trying to persuade. Persuading scholars and others who know a lot about your subject is one of the primary goals of serious research, and, ultimately, your instructor will want you to do serious research.

From here on out, we're going to assume that your primary audience is your *implied* audience, which, as a shorthand, we'll refer to simply as "your readers."

# Introduction

A good introduction has to do three things:

* capture the interest of your readers
* give them a sense of why they should care about what you have to say
* articulate your main claim and indicate how you intend to prove it

You can generally do the first and second things by making clear which important questions your paper is intended to answer. That doesn't mean starting off with a question or—even worse—a series of questions. For example:

"What is the most serious problem facing America? What is the best way of solving it? How do we ensure people who need health care get it?"

Asking such vague questions at the beginning of your paper won't convince the knowledgeable and informed readers you're writing for that you've got anything especially compelling to contribute.

Another strategy unlikely to inspire confidence is starting out with very broad or dramatic-sounding phrases. Such an introduction may well be appropriate for magazine readers in a doctor's office, but it's unlikely to do much for *your* readers. Take the following opening to a paper on healthcare costs:

"Health care is a massive problem in this country, and already-exorbitant costs are spiraling out of control!"

For your readers, a melodramatic sentence like this throws up a red flag. It shouts out: "Here's a writer prone to using imprecise and exaggerated language!" For the knowledgeable and informed readers you're writing for, a clear, factual sentence like this would work much better:

"In the last 10 years, healthcare costs have risen at twice the rate of inflation."

After you've introduced your topic with a strong and specific opening sentence, you should move very quickly to inform your readers what you're going to be arguing. You can express this in a thesis statement. There is no hard rule about where in your introduction your thesis statement goes, but most readers will expect to see it toward the end of your first paragraph.

After telling your readers what you're going to be arguing, you should give some indication of *how* you're going to be arguing it. So include a brief preview of the key points you're going to make in support of your thesis.

You probably won't know what all those key points are going to be until you've completed a draft of your paper. For this reason, it's often easier to wait until you've written your paper before finalizing your introduction.

# Context

When we talk about ***context***, we're talking about the background information your readers need to understand what you're arguing and why what you're arguing matters.

Students tend to provide a great deal of context. This is usually a mistake. It's a mistake because your readers will likely already know a lot about your topic, and telling them really basic stuff is just wasting their time. It's also wasting *your* opportunity to give them the background they'll need to understand what is original or most compelling about your argument.

Let's say you're arguing for acceptance of a new peace plan for Israel and the Palestinian territories. You won't need to discuss the founding of the World Zionist Organization in 1881, and there's not much to be gained by summarizing the major wars the two sides have fought.

You'll only want to give context that is directly related to the major points you'll be making in your paper. So if the key tenet of your new peace plan is the designation of Jerusalem as an international city, it would probably make sense to provide a brief overview of the history of the status of Jerusalem and quickly summarize why plans similar to the one you're proposing failed in the past. But that's about it.

The takeaway here is that you should provide context selectively, depending on what information will help your readers understand and follow your particular argument.

# Definitions

Defining key terms in your paper is crucial for much the same reason that providing context is. It helps your readers understand what you're arguing.

There's no need to define a word if you're using it in the way that everyone instinctively understands it. But if you're using a term that could be defined in multiple ways, it's generally a good idea to make clear the way *you* are using it. Such a definition is often referred to as a ***provisional definition***.

Take the word "voucher." This word is commonly understood to refer to a piece of paper that entitles the bearer to something free or discounted—like a coupon or a gift certificate. But when you're talking about school vouchers, this common meaning has little relevance.

The definition that would be relevant to an argument about school vouchers—what we're calling the "provisional definition"—is more likely to be something like a government coupon given to private schools to help fund a child's education. Early on in a paper about school vouchers, you'd want to make absolutely clear that this is what you mean when you're referring to "vouchers."

# Subclaims and evidence

Okay, now we're ready to look at what should probably be considered the building blocks of your research paper: the subclaims and evidence.

A ***subclaim***—or "subordinate claim"—is related to (or, again, *subordinate* to) your main claim. To persuade your readers you're right about your main claim, you'll have to persuade them you're right about your subclaims. For example, to prove that "generous welfare programs stifle initiative among the unemployed" (your main claim), you might have to prove that "visits by the unemployed to job centers decrease when unemployment benefits are raised" (a subclaim) and that "countries offering the most generous welfare benefits tend to have the worst unemployment" (another subclaim).

You prove subclaims with evidence. To prove that the unemployed visit job centers less after benefits rise, for example, it's likely you'd need to find statistics clearly showing that trend. However, you could also consider other kinds of evidence—for example, a controlled experiment showing that 75 percent of subjects chose a guaranteed payment of $50 over the chance to earn $100 by performing well on a test.

There are two principal methods of organizing your subclaims and the evidence that goes with them. One is "progressive" (where subclaims only really make sense when they're arranged in a specific order), and the other is "non-progressive" (where, logically, the order doesn't matter). With "non-progressive" organization, you should generally arrange subclaims from least to most convincing. That way, you'll end on a high note and reduce the risk of leaving your audience underwhelmed.

# Refutation of counterarguments

In basic research papers, it's generally sufficient to make your argument. However, with more sophisticated papers, it's important to show why ***counterarguments***, or objections to your argument, don't invalidate or seriously undermine it.

There are three main types of counterargument that someone challenging your argument can make:

1. They can take your claim and provide an alternative explanation.

2. They can challenge the quality or scope of your evidence.

3. They can point out inconsistencies or logical gaps in your argument.

Here's a quick illustration of these different types of counterargument when applied to a specific thesis statement:

Let's say you're arguing that high levels of childhood obesity are caused by excessive consumption of high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS).

A critic making the first kind of counterargument might argue that the main cause of childhood obesity isn't too much HFCS but a lack of exercise. If instead they used the second kind of counterargument, then they might argue that the statistical data you used to show HFCS is causing childhood obesity is flawed because it was based on a small and non-representative sample of children. If they were making the third kind of counterargument, then they might point out that while the data certainly shows that consumption of HFCS has increased concurrently with childhood obesity, it doesn't prove the two trends are causally related.

You would strengthen your own argument about HFCS consumption by ***refuting*** all of these counterarguments.

"Refuting" something in its strongest sense means proving it's not true. And sometimes, you'll be able to do exactly that.

For example, For example, if back in December 2017 you had argued against lifting the longstanding ban on drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) and someone had made the counterargument that drilling in the ANWR would halve the price of gas in the United States within six months, you could probably find enough evidence to prove that what they were saying was, in an objective sense, untrue.

Many counterarguments rooted in statistics can, like the oil example, be refuted outright. However, in arguments based more on interpretation, it's often not possible to refute counterarguments in the strongest sense. In cases like these, you generally won't be "refuting" counterarguments as much as *acknowledging*them and showing why they don't undermine your argument in any meaningful way.

As a general rule, you should first refute the counterargument you think your readers will consider most damaging to your argument and then work your way to the one they'll consider least damaging. Tackling the most serious objections exudes confidence and tells your readers you're ready to deal with their most pressing concerns.

***Tell Me More***

**“Letter from Birmingham Jail”**

Here's a real-life example of refutation that doesn't involve disproving counterarguments outright.

During the 1960s civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr. argued that Americans everywhere should respect laws ending racial segregation in public schools. However, opponents of desegregation (and even some supporters) argued that Dr. King couldn't reasonably argue for obedience to these laws while calling on his followers to break others.

In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," his famous defense of the civil rights movement, King addressed this apparent double standard. Addressing his critics directly, he said:

"You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to follow the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws."

King acknowledged the legitimacy of the criticism but then went on to show why, ultimately, the selective obedience he was arguing for did not make him a hypocrite:

"[T]here are two types of laws: There are just and there are unjust laws. And I would agree with Saint Augustine that 'An unjust law is no law at all.'"

Again, he acknowledged the accusation of inconsistency but then went on to show why the accusation didn't seriously undermine his argument that some laws should be obeyed and others broken. With reference to Saint Augustine's division of "just" and "unjust" laws, King argued that everyone should obey the former, while no one should have to obey the latter.

You shouldn't organize your argument in a vacuum, and it's important to recognize that good organization is less about ticking items off a checklist than it is about figuring out how to persuade your readers you're right. This is particularly true when you're considering which counterarguments require refutation.

If King had been addressing only his most loyal supporters, he probably wouldn't have had to address the inconsistency counterargument. But King realized that the success of the civil rights movement hinged on recruiting a much wider group, including many Americans who were broadly sympathetic to his cause but uncomfortable with his tactics. These people were an important part of King's audience, so King chose to refute one of the counterarguments that was most persuasive to them.

# Conclusion

Now you should have your whole argument laid out in front of you. This puts you in a good position to write not only your conclusion but also, funnily enough, your introduction. You probably wrote a draft of your introduction before you knew exactly how you were going to organize your argument, so it's worth revisiting that introduction and ensuring there's a match between what you said you were going to do and what you did.

Your conclusion will be similar to your introduction in that it will summarize your key points. But it will be different because there's no longer any need to instruct your readers on how to read your paper—they'll have already read it. Instead, your summary should reiterate the strongest points of your argument and, where helpful, account for any serious weaknesses.

You shouldn't introduce new subclaims or evidence in your conclusion, but you should always feel free to acknowledge limitations and suggest areas for future research. For example, if you have argued vouchers won't help resolve the problem of inadequate public school funding, you could acknowledge that there are other ways of using private education to relieve pressure on public schools—perhaps tax credits for the parents of transfer students—and that more research is necessary to determine whether this approach would work better.

Finally, you need a memorable final sentence or couple of sentences. What you generally *don't*want is a final sentence that starts "In this paper, I have argued that—" It's too boring. Instead, try and think of how you can restate your main claim in a way that will stick with your readers. Going back to the vouchers example, what do you think of an ending like this?

"When it comes to inadequate public school funding, vouchers are an unwelcome distraction. Not only do they fail to solve the problem, they make it worse. We've spent enough time debating vouchers. It's time to move on."

# Checklist

1. Make an outline of your paper
2. Identify your implied audience, the main readers you will be targeting in your paper.
3. Write an introduction that captures the interest of your readers, establishes a need for your paper, and communicates your main claim.
4. Provide the context and definitions your readers will need to understand and follow your argument.
5. Order your subclaims in a logical progression or from least to most persuasive.
6. Refute counterarguments either outright or by showing that they don’t seriously undermine your argument.
7. Write a conclusion that briefly summarizes your paper, suggests limitations, and provides closure.