TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATION*

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This handout addresses how to improve the body of your memo or brief by focusing on the large-scale organization of the document as a whole and the small-scale organization between and within paragraphs.

Tips to improve large-scale organization:

Large-scale organization refers to the organization of the document as a whole. The large-scale organization will usually be dictated by the issues and the legal rule. You must decide how to break down the issues and how to present them in a coherent way to the reader.

➤ Order topics to improve readability and persuasiveness.

Choose an organizational pattern that best allows you to convey your message to your particular audience. For example, in a memo, order the points to improve accuracy. In a brief, order the arguments to improve persuasiveness.

You do not have to discuss topics in the order that courts discuss them. Even if the topic is part of a numbered statute, you don’t have to discuss the first part of the statute first and the last part last.

Ordering Options: Common Techniques

- Strongest arguments up front: starting with your strongest argument allows the document to make a strong first impression as a whole.
- Threshold issue first: discussing threshold issues early will allow you to get them out of the way and focus your reader’s attention on the elements that follow.
- Most contentious issue first: focusing on the most contentious issue first allows you to immediately direct the reader’s attention to what could often be your lengthiest or most complex analysis.
- Moving from broad to narrow: to enhance readability and understanding, consider beginning with the broader arguments before zeroing in on the more specific nuances of your argument.
- Moving from simple to complex issues: when a legal problem involves issues of varying complexity, it can be effective to analyze the simple issues upfront to quickly dispose of them before focusing the reader on the more in-depth analysis of complex issues in the remainder of the document.

* Written by Lisa Qi, adapted from “Crafting Mid-Level Organization” by Maureen Aidasani and Sarah Barr Kahl.
➢ **Proportion**

Consider the overall proportion of arguments in each section of the document. Decide which proportions are necessary to your theme and adjust accordingly: devote more of the discussion to the points you most want to emphasize.

Your decisions about order and proportion will go hand in hand. For example, if you are writing a persuasive piece and want to emphasize your best argument by placing it first, you might devote most of the section to that argument.

➢ **Use roadmaps and mini-roadmaps.**

Reference the law at the beginning of the document with a roadmap. This helps the reader understand the document’s organization and the layout of the law. A roadmap signals to the reader that the document is organized around the law provided at the beginning.

Similarly, just as the roadmap provides the law at the front of the whole document, a mini-roadmap provides a guide to a subsection of the document or to one part of the analysis already laid out in the roadmap.

➢ **Use headings to describe how sections fit into the overall document.**

Headings can help the reader see how sections fit into the document’s overall message or argument. In persuasive documents, rather than merely describing the section to be discussed, you can use persuasive headings that state the argument.

➢ **Double-check your large-scale organization.**

One way to check your large-scale organization is to read the first sentence of each paragraph throughout the document. These sentences should give you a summary of the main points of the paper.

**Tips to improve small-scale organization:**

Small-scale organization refers to the organization between and within paragraphs and sentences. Effective small-scale organization clearly communicates the logical links between those paragraphs and sentences.

➢ **Use effective topic sentences.**

Topic sentences should convey the main points of the paragraphs. You can use a topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph to state the conclusion the paragraph supports, or you can use it to create a question in the reader’s mind and then explain the answer in the body of the paragraph.
A good rule of thumb in evaluating cohesion between paragraphs is that a reader should be able to tell from the topic sentences how each paragraph fits into the overall discussion.

- **Use mini-conclusions.**

At the end of your discussion of a legal element or issue, provide a conclusion of that element or issue in the form of a mini-conclusion. This mini-conclusion should use the relevant terms of art in the roadmap and the topic sentence and should provide the most important reasons for your conclusion.

- **Clarify logical connections between sentences.**

Make the connection clear between sentences and phrases to let the reader know where are you going with your argument.

  - Use parallel structure to quickly highlight the similarities and differences.
  - Repeat key terms of art: for example, if you mean to discuss this *contract*, do not shift to using the word *document*. Changing terms can confuse the legal reader.
  - Use a transition such as *furthermore, because, or although* to add clarity (see below).

- **Communicate the links between sentences and paragraphs.**

Use transitional words between sentences or paragraphs in order to clearly signal a shift to a different idea. Be aware that overuse of one transition within a paragraph may signal organization problems – for example, if you use *however* repeatedly, check to see if you are combining points that could be better presented in separate paragraphs.

  To signal similarity: *similarly, analogously, as, accordingly*…

  To signal contrast: *but, in contrast, conversely, however, yet, nonetheless*…

  To introduce examples: *for example, specifically, namely, such as, including, including but not limited to*…

  Summarizing: *finally, in conclusion, in summary*…