

Organizational Patterns of Paragraphs

The basic unit of thought

Perhaps one of the best ways to improve your reading ability is to learn to read paragraphs effectively. Many experts believe the paragraph, not the sentence, is the basic unit of thought of a selection. If one can quickly grasp the meaning of each of these thought units while reading, then comprehension will be heightened.

It is important to identify with the author's perspective by discovering the way the message is being sent. Every writer has a purpose for writing and some plan of action for getting a message across. This plan of action is the order in which the material will be presented in the text. This order, often called a pattern of organization, should be present in acceptable writing from the smallest to the largest unit of writing: the paragraph, groups of paragraphs, subchapters, chapters, groups of chapters, whole books, and even series of books. Each of these, then, contains a certain pattern of organization.

Anticipating the order in which the material will be presented helps you put the facts into perspective and to see how the parts fit into the whole. For example, if the selection begins by indicating that there are four important components of management, you are alert to look for four key phrases to mark and remember. Likewise, if a comparison is suggested, you want to note the points that are similar in nature. For material that shows cause and effect, you need to anticipate the linkage and note the relationship.

The importance of these patterns is that they signal how the facts will be presented. They are blueprints for you to use.

In textbook reading the number of details can be overwhelming. The mind responds to logical patterns; relating the small parts to the whole simplifies complexities of the material and makes remembering easier.

Although key signal words help in identifying the particular type of pattern, a single paragraph can be a mixture of different patterns. Your aim is to anticipate the overall pattern and then place the facts into a broad perspective.

The following six examples are the patterns of organization that are most frequently found in textbooks.

Simple Listing

Items are randomly listed in a series of supporting facts or details. These supporting elements are of equal value, and the order in which they are presented is of no importance. Changing the order of the items does not change the meaning of the paragraph.

Signal words often used for simple listing are:

- in addition
- several
- also
- for example
- another
- a number of

Description

Description is like listing; the characters that make up a description are no more than a simple listing of details.

Definition

Frequently in textbook reading an entire paragraph is devoted to defining a complex term or idea. The concept is initially defined and then further expanded with examples and restatements.

Signal words used for definition are:

- is defined as
- is called
- means
- refers to
- is described as
- term or concept

Chronological (Time) Order or Sequence

Items are listed in the order in which they occurred or in a specifically planned order in which they must develop. In this case, the order is important and changing it would change the meaning.

Signal words often used for chronological order or sequence are:

- first, second, third
- until etc.
- at last
- before, after
- next
- when
- later

Comparison - Contrast

Items are related by the comparisons (similarities) that are made or by the contrasts (differences) that are presented. The author's purpose is to show similarities and differences.

Signal words often used for comparison-contrast are:

- similar, different
- bigger than, smaller
- on the other hand
- than
- but
- in the same way
- however
- parallels

Cause and Effect

In this pattern, one item is shown as having produced another element. An event (effect) is said to have happened because of some situation or circumstance (cause). The cause (the action) stimulates the event, or effect (the outcome).

Signal words often used for cause and effect are:

- for this reason
- hence
- consequently
- because
- on that account
- made

