

ORGANIZATIONAL PATTERNS: GUIDES TO LEARNING

Almost all academic material presented in book or lecture form is organized into one or more well-established organizational patterns. Most writers/lecturers use a plan of organization to arrange ideas, information, and insights according to these patterns. The patterns also help the reader/listener recognize key ideas, identify the writer's/lecturer's purpose, and select relevant information to learn.

Organizational patterns can be used to organize notes, interpret graphs and tables, write essays, and predict test questions. Learning to recognize and use the patterns of organization can help you improve comprehension as well as your thinking and writing skills. There are three major patterns: sequence, classification, and contrast/comparison.

SEQUENCE involves time, processes, procedures, steps, and stages. It is concerned with chronology, order of importance, geographical or special placement, and cause & effect relationships. Examples include how to make pizza (order of importance), historical events (chronology), the solar system (special placement), and stages of the life cycle (chronology). Key words which can help you identify this pattern include: stages, steps, phases, during, first, second, most important, next to, in the center, beside, after, results in, causes.

CLASSIFICATION pattern involves dividing a topic and discussing each of its components. This pattern is concerned with categories, parts, elements, and characteristics. Definitions, which involve a general class, its distinguishing characteristics, and an explanation, example, or an application, are part of a classification pattern. So are lists (stating information one after the other, in no particular order). Examples of a classification pattern include: types of cars (Chevy, Ford, Buick, and a Mercedes Benz), types of discrimination (racism, ageism, sexism), names of people in your family (George, Sarah, Timothy, Mike), and kinds of academic thought patterns (sequence, classification, and contrast/comparison). Key words include: kinds of, parts, characteristics, aspects, types of, in addition, includes, comprises of, elements.

CONTRAST and COMPARISON involves the relationship between and among ideas, theories, concepts, or events. This pattern emphasizes similarities, differences, or a combination of both. An example of a contrast/comparison pattern: identifying the similarities and differences between the three major organizational patterns; comparing Republican and Democrat candidates' views on campaign issues; choosing a restraint (Chinese versus Italian); choosing a car (Ford versus Honda). Key words include: in contrast, however, on the other hand, unlike, likewise, and, similarly, correspondingly. The contrast and comparison pattern is the easiest because it is so much a part of our lives. We know what we know because we are always contrasting and comparing: the weather, people around us, jobs, colleges, programs, courses. It's ingrained.

You can probably guess that the patterns are not distinct. Instead, they are often combined. For example, in describing the process of dining out you might first list the different restaurants available to choose from (listing—classification pattern). Once you've listed the different types of restaurants, you would then make your choice based on the kinds of food provided, the service, the cost, and the atmosphere (contrast and comparison). After you've made your choice you would then proceed to the restraint, enter, be seated, look at the menu, order, eat, and pay the bill (process-sequence pattern).

Consider the courses you are taking this semester. What thought patterns are predominant? Think about essay exam questions. What kind of responses do they require? How might the above thought patterns be applied to essay questions? The key to understanding and using patterns is to think about the information and how it is related...and practice.