

Help me get organized!

Struggle with organization in your writing? Getting comments from professors that things don't "flow" or there's no "logical progression?"

Here are some tips:

1. **Invest in some good, old fashioned note cards.** How do you collect your research? Dump it all into a Word doc and then morph it into your first draft? Sometimes this ends up looking like you just stirred up the stew. Try the old fashioned way.
 - Buy some notecards.
 - Create a notecard with the citation for each source and number them.
 - When you find something interesting that you may want to use, put the number of the source at the top and write that piece of information (only that one piece!) on the card.
 - Write quotes word for word and put them in quotation marks – note the page number.
 - When you feel like you have enough data to write your paper, put the notecards into piles by subject. Suddenly, all your information is organized!
2. **Outline first.**
 - a. Yes, we mean it.
 - i. Don't just start writing.
 - ii. "But I don't have time for an extra step!" If you struggle with organization, this can be a lifesaver and actually **save** you time.
 - b. Start with the main point of your paper.
 - i. If it's thesis-driven, this would be your argument.
 - ii. If it's a lit review, this would be a statement of the problem.
 - iii. If it's a scientific study, this would be the hypothesis and major findings.
 - c. Then outline your major points.
 - i. Not sure what the major points are? Look at your piles of notecards for help.
3. **Write all of your topic sentences first.** Seems weird, but try it! Many students, even graduate students, don't have solid topic sentences that preview the coming paragraph. How to solve that? Write them first! Since you live in the computer age, you can just type them right into your outline. Once every topic sentence in your paper is written, you can simply fill in the details and the other scholars you are using to support your main point. Of course, you can revise them as your paper takes shape, but at least you set yourself up to succeed.
4. **Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em, then tell 'em, then tell 'em what you told 'em.** Academic writing (at least in the US and countries with a similar academic culture) is not about spinning a story or building suspense. Scholars are generally very busy people (this includes your professors) and they want to absorb your message as quickly and as easily as possible. A preview, a body that follows the same order as the preview, and a conclusion with a quick review of the material is still the standard.

