

Common Patterns of Paragraph Organization

1. SIMPLE LISTING

Author uses details that are of equal value. The paragraph presents a listing of information. Changing the order does not change the meaning of the paragraph.

Method of Attack - Look at sentences to note what is being discussed and how. Look for signal words: in addition, another, several, for example, also.

Example:

Louis [XIV] was not a stupid man; he was handsome and lazy. Madame de Pompadour was his most celebrated mistress; she was not the only one. Apart from women, he had few interests and no desire to 'waste' his energies on projects he deemed relatively unimportant. His kind, dull wife bore him ten children in hardly more than ten years, but she could never hold his attention. Women were his great diversion. One followed another. The post of "king's head mistress" became the most coveted in the realm. Father sought it for their daughters, husbands for their wives. A favorite mistress, like Madame de Pompadour or Madame du Barry (c. 1746-1793), wielded power. To offend such a person might be to risk the monarch's wrath. (A History of the Western World by Solomon Modell.)

2. GENERALIZATION AND EXAMPLE

Author expresses one central thought and follows it with example to clarify.

Method of Attack - Look for central thought/main idea and then for supporting details.

Example:

In the U.S., the age-old problem of excessive drinking is taking a disturbing new turn and affecting new kinds of victims. On a New York subway train, a school-bound 15-year-old holds his books in one hand, a brown paper bag containing a beer bottle in the other. He takes a swig, then passes the bottle to a classmate. In a San Francisco suburb, several high schools freshman show up for class drunk every morning, while others sneak off for a nip or two of whiskey during the lunch recess. On the campuses the beer bash is fashionable once again, and lowered drinking ages have made liquor the high without the hassle. (Time. April 22, 1974.)

3. SEQUENCE OF EVENTS/CHRONOLOGICAL

Author lists details in the order in which they occurred.

Method of Attack - Note signal words, the beginning and ending thoughts and the type of intermediate steps. Signals words: when, then, first, second, next, finally, last.

Example:

Here is a four-step method which can help you prevent your mind from wandering while reading. First, before you attempt to read anything, look over the length of the material to see if you have time to read it: if not, mark a spot where you intend to stop. Second, read the title and the first paragraph, looking for the main idea of the article. Next, read the boldface headings, if there are any, and the first sentence of each paragraph. And finally, read the last paragraph, which will probably contain a summary of the material. By doing this, you condition your mind to 'accept the material you want to read, and thus reduce mindwandering.

4. COMPARISON CONTRAST

Author relates ideas/objects to one another by showing how they are alike and how they are different.

Method of Attack - Look for signal words. Read to locate the two ideas that the writer is comparing or contrasting. Signal words: Similarities: also, in addition, likewise, further. Differences: but, however, although, even so, in contrast, on the other hand, nevertheless, yet.

Example:

There is a growing controversy over the use of drugs in sports. Denny McLain, pitcher for the Detroit Tigers, claims that he needs pep pills or something to keep him going, especially when he is expected to be good 162 ball games a year. However, Dr. William H. Fowler, Jr. of the UCLA medical school claims that studies show there is no increase in strength, motor performance, or vital capacities. (Theodore Irwin, "Doping Athletes," Parade, September 6, 1978.)

5. CAUSE AND EFFECT

Author uses one item as having produced another element. Author explains why something occurred or what happened as a result of something.

Method of Attack - Look for interrelationships of ideas. Be alert to reasons why something happened.

Example:

What circumstances lead a person to follow a life of crime? There is no easy answer to this question: however, psychologists have suggested that clues may be found in the childhood of the criminal. If a child is reared in a negative environment, he may be more likely to turn to crime than a child who has had more positive influences. For example, a child of very strict parents or from an extremely poor home may run a greater risk of being involved in crimes as he reaches adolescence. Some researchers have suggested that a basic personality flaw may be responsible for forcing a person into committing crimes. It is, in other words, a factor within the genes that might predispose persons to criminal actions. Still another theory is based upon the growing evidence that pressures within our modern world have caused the rapid growth in the crime rate. A person may be unable to cope with the fast pace and complex lifestyles that exist in our present society: as a result, even someone who is an unlikely "criminal type" might be forced into crime.