Organization

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WHEN I WAS A WRITING RESOURCE TEACHER, I was a fountain of formulas, ready to spout forth the appropriate formula for each type of writing: "First, Next, Last" for narratives, ASO2 (Audience, Situation, Opinion, Two Reasons) for persuasive writing, and of course, the all-purpose five-paragraph essay. For many students, writing instruction rarely extends beyond these simplistic recipes. But teaching organization is much more complicated than teaching students the formula for a five-paragraph essay. Although formulaic writing can help scaffold students' early efforts at writing a particular genre, the scaffolding must eventually be removed to allow students to grow as writers.

If focus is the foundation for constructing a piece of writing, organization is the the structural framework for that writing. Organization is important to effective writing because it provides readers with a framework to help them fulfill their expectations for the text. A well-organized piece of writing supports readers by making it easy for them to follow, while a poorly organized piece leads readers through a maze of confusion and confounded or unmet expectations.

Organization, simply put, is the logical progression and completeness of ideas in a text. Instruction in organization focuses on two areas: **text structures** specific to the particular genre and the **cohesive elements** that tie clauses, sentences, and paragraphs together into a cohesive whole.

Text structures

A **text structure** is the framework of a text's beginning, middle, and end. Different narrative and expository genres have different purposes and different audiences, and so they require different text structures. Beginnings and endings help link the text into a coherent whole.

BEGINNINGS: HOOKING YOUR READER

Where to begin is a crucial decision for a writer. Just as a good beginning can draw a reader into a piece of writing, a mediocre beginning can discourage a reader from reading further. The beginning, also called the lead or the hook, orients the reader to the purpose of the writing by introducing characters or setting (for narrative) or the topic, thesis, or argument (for expository writing). A good beginning also sets up expectations for the purpose, style, and mood of the piece. Good writers know how to hook their readers in the opening sentences and paragraphs by using techniques such as dialogue, flashback, description, inner thoughts, and jumping right into the action.

WHAT'S IN THE MIDDLE?

The organization of the middle of a piece of writing depends on the genre. Researchers have identified five basic organizational structures: **sequence**, **description**, **cause and effect**, **compare and contrast**, and **problem and solution**.

Sequence uses time, numerical, or spatial order as the organizing structure. Some narrative genres that use a chronological sequence structure are personal narrative genres (memoir, autobiographical incident, autobiography), imaginative story genres (fairytales, folktales, fantasy, science fiction), and realistic fiction genres. Narrative story structures

include an initiating event, complicating actions that build to a high point, and a resolution. Many narratives also include the protagonist's goals and obstacles that must be overcome to achieve those goals.

As early as kindergarten, children can be introduced to basic informational genres that are organized sequentially, including learning structures for writing instructions, experimental recounts and experimental procedures. Older students can learn to use timelines to organize biographies, oral histories, and recounts of current and historical events.

Description is used to describe the characteristic features and events of a specific subject ("My Cat") or a general category ("Cats"). Descriptive reports may be arranged according to categories of related attributes, moving from general categories of features to specific attributes.

Children's initial attempts at descriptive reports often are "All About" reports that have little internal organization. Informational alphabet books and riddle books can be used to introduce kindergarten children to the writing of descriptive reports through shared or interactive writing. Older children can learn to develop categories of related attributes to organize their reports by using webs, concept maps, and software such as Inspiration and Kidspiration. Expectation outlines (Spiegel, 1981) are another strategy that can help students anticipate the categories of information found in a report.

Cause and Effect structure is used to show causal relationships between events. Cause and effect structures organize more sophisticated narratives as childen become more adept at showing the relationship between events. Young children also can begin to extend opinion essays by giving reasons to support their opinions using the word because. Signal words for cause and effect structures also include if...then, as a result, and therefore.

Comparison and Contrast structure is used to explain how two or more objects, events, or positions in an argument are similar or different. Graphic organizers such as venn diagrams, compare/contrast organizers, and data matrices can be used to compare features across different categories. Primary grade children can begin to use words such as same and different to compare things. Other words used to signal comparison and contrast organizational structures include alike, in contrast, similarities, differences, and on the other hand.

Problem and Solution requires writers to state a problem and come up with a solution. Although problem/solution structures are typically found in informational writing, realistic fiction also often uses a problem/solution structure that children can learn to identify.

ENDINGS: BEYOND "HAPPILY EVER AFTER"

Anyone who has watched a great movie for ninety minutes only to have it limp to the finish with weak ending knows that strong endings are just as critical to effective writing as strong beginnings. And anyone who has watched the director's cut of a movie with all the alternate endings knows that even great directors have trouble coming up with satisfying endings for their movies. Just like directors, writers have to decide how to wrap up the action in their stories, resolving the conflict and tying up loose ends in a way that will leave their audience satisfied. Student writers struggle with writing strong endings, often relying on the weak "I had a lot of fun" summation or the classic "It was just a dream" ending to rescue them from their stories.

The type of ending an author chooses depends on his or her purpose. When the purpose is to entertain, endings may be happy or tragic, or a surprise ending may provide a twist. Endings can be circular, looping back to the beginning so readers end where they began, or they can leave the reader hanging, wishing for more. Endings can be deliberately ambiguous or ironic, designed to make the reader think, or they can explicitly state the moral of the story, telling the reader what to think. Strong endings for expository texts can summarize the highlights, restate the main points, or end with a final zinger statement to drive home the main point to the audience.

Cohesion: the glue that holds the structure together

If narrative and expository structures are the framework, cohesive elements such as transition words are the glue that holds these structural elements together. Transition words show the relationship between different sentences and ideas. Poor writers tend to loosely connect their sentences with and and then. Good writers use transition words that show causal and logical relationships between words, sentences and paragraphs, such as because and after.

TRANSITION WORDS

There are six categories of transition words:

1. **Spatial order.** Words used in descriptive writing to signal spatial relationships, such as above, below, beside, nearby, beyond, inside, and outside.
2. **Time order.** Words used in writing narratives, and instructions to signal chronological sequence, such as before, after, first, next, then, when, finally, while, as, during, earlier, later, and meanwhile.
3. **Numerical order.** Words used in expository writing to signal order of importance, such as first, second, also, finally, in addition, equally important, and more or less importantly.
4. **Cause/effect order.** Words used in expository writing to signal causal relationships, such as because, since, for, so, as a result, consequently, thus, and hence.
5. **Comparison/contrast order.** Words used in expository writing to signal similarities and differences, such as (for similarities) also, additionally, just as, as if, as though, like, and similarly; and (for differences) but, yet, only, although, whereas, in contrast, conversely, however, on the other hand, rather, instead, in spite of, and nevertheless.
6. **General/specific order.** Words used in descriptive reports and arguments to signal more specific elaboration on an idea, such as for example, such as, like, namely, for instance, that is, in fact, in other words, and indeed.

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR ORGANIZATION

These **guiding questions for organization** can help students make sure that they have provided coherent transitions between the ideas in their writing.

- Does your piece have a clear beginning, middle, and end?
- Does your piece have a strong beginning that hooks the reader?
- Does your piece have a strong ending that fits the focus?
- Are the ideas and actions connected to each other?
- Can your reader follow the piece logically from beginning to end?
- Is it complete? Does it feel finished?

References

Spiegel, D. L. (1981). Six alternatives to the directed reading activity. The Reading Teacher, 34, 914-922.