

# Organizing Your Presentation: Basic Outline Format

Good organization is essential anytime you need to communicate your ideas to another person or group of people. It helps them follow you, understand how ideas are related, and retain the information.

Regardless of your audience, purpose, or content, the following outline format will help you determine the best placement of the information you need to convey. Remember to start with the body – decide on your main points first – and then proceed to develop an introduction and conclusion. All decisions about content and organization should be made with your overarching thesis in mind. The number of main points and subpoints depend on your particular topic and the content you need to convey.

- I. Introduction
  - A. Attention-getter (How will you make the audience interested and want to listen?)
  - B. Establish credibility (Why are you qualified to speak on this topic?)
  - C. Thesis (What is the main focus of your presentation?)
  - D. Preview (What will your main points be in this presentation?)
  
- II. Body
  - A. First main point
    1. Supporting materials/ideas
    2. Supporting materials/ideas
  
  - B. Second main point
    1. Supporting materials/ideas
    2. Supporting materials/ideas
  
  - C. Third main point
    1. Supporting materials/ideas
    2. Supporting materials/ideas
  
  - D. etc...
  
- III. Conclusion
  - A. Signal to the audience that you've finished with your main points
  - B. Review your main points
  - C. Provide closure

The reading that follows describes several types of organizational patterns that you can use to decide what your main points will be. It is an excerpt from: O'Hair, D., Stewart, R., & Rubensten, H. (2007). *A speaker's guidebook: Text and reference* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Boston: Bedford-St. Martin's.





# 12

## Types of Organizational Arrangements

Once you select the main points for your speech, you must decide on a type of organizational arrangement or combination of arrangements for them. Public speeches make use of at least a dozen different organizational arrangements. Here we look at seven commonly used patterns for all forms of speeches: topical, chronological, spatial, causal, problem-solution, narrative, and circular. Chapter 26 covers three additional patterns of organization: *Monroe's motivated sequence* and *refutation*, which are designed specifically for persuasive speeches, and *comparative advantage*, which can be applied to both informative and persuasive speeches. (See Table 12.1 and Chapter 26.)

As you review these organizational designs, bear in mind that there are multiple ways to organize a speech. Each method communicates something different, even if the topic is the same. Your goal should be to choose one that listeners can easily follow.

Once you select an organizational arrangement, you can proceed to flesh out the main points with subordinate ideas. *Your subpoints need not always follow the pattern you select for your main points.* For instance, for a speech about the recent history of tattooing in the United States, you might choose a chronological pattern to organize the main points but switch to a cause-effect arrangement for some of your subpoints about why tattooing is on the rise today. (See Table 12.1 for descriptions of patterns.) Organization, whether of main points or subpoints, could be driven by what's most effective for the particular rhetorical situation.

### Arranging Speech Points Topically

When each of the main points is a subtopic or category of the speech topic, the **topical pattern of arrangement** (also called the *categorical pattern*) may be most appropriate. Consider preparing an informative speech about choosing Chicago as a place to establish a career. You plan to emphasize three reasons for choosing Chicago: the strong economic climate of the city, its cultural variety, and its accessible public transportation. Of relatively equal importance, these three points can be arranged in any order without affecting each other or the speech purpose negatively. For example:

- EXAMPLE: Chicago is an excellent place to establish a career.
- I. Accessible transportation
  - II. Cultural variety
  - III. Economic stability

TABLE 12.1 • Types and Functions of Organizational Arrangements

Function	Pattern of Organization
Topical	To stress natural divisions in a topic; allows points to be moved around to emphasize listeners' needs and interests
Chronological	To describe a series of developments in time or a set of actions occurring sequentially
Spatial	To describe or explain the physical arrangement of a place, scene, event, or object
Causal (Cause-Effect)	To explain or demonstrate a topic in terms of its underlying causes or effects
Problem-Solution	To demonstrate the nature and significance of a problem and provide justification for a proposed solution
Narrative	To convey ideas through the medium of a story with characters, settings, and a plot
Circular	To demonstrate how one idea leads to another and then another, all of which leads back to the speech thesis
Monroe's Motivated Sequence	To motivate listeners to adopt a course of action (see Chapter 26)
Refutation	To disprove an opposing claim to your position (see Chapter 26)
Comparative Advantage	To demonstrate the superiority of one viewpoint or proposal over another (see Chapter 26)

This is not to say that when using a topical arrangement you should arrange the main points without careful consideration. If your main points permit it, you may want to arrange them in ascending or descending order according to their relative importance, complexity, or timeliness. Perhaps you have determined that listeners' main concern is the city's economic stability, followed by an interest in its cultural variety and accessible transportation. You may then decide to arrange the points in the order of the audience's most immediate needs and interests:

- I. Economic stability
- II. Cultural variety
- III. Accessible transportation

Topical arrangements give you the greatest freedom to structure main points according to how you wish to present your topic. You can approach a topic by dividing it into two or more categories, for example, or you can lead with your strongest evidence or leave your most compelling points until you near the conclusion. If your topic does not call out for one of the other patterns described in this chapter, be sure to experiment with the topical pattern.

## Arranging Speech Points Chronologically

Some speech topics lend themselves well to the arrangement of main points according to their occurrence in time relative to each other. The **chronological pattern of arrangement** (also called the *temporal pattern*) follows the natural sequential order of the main points. To switch points around would make the arrangement appear unnatural and might confuse the audience. Topics that describe a series of events in time (e.g., events leading to the adoption of a peace treaty) or develop in line with a set pattern of actions or tasks (e.g., building a model car, procedures for admitting patients to a hospital) call out to be organized according to a chronological pattern of arrangement. For example, a speech describing the development of the World Wide Web calls for a chronological, or time-ordered, sequence of main points:

**THESIS STATEMENT:** The Internet evolved from a small network designed for academic scientists into a vast system of networks used by billions of people around the globe.

- I. The Internet was first conceived in 1962 as the ARPANET to promote the sharing of research among scientists in the U.S.
- II. In the 1980s a team created TCP/IP, a language that could link networks, and the Internet as we know it was born.
- III. At the end of the cold war, the ARPANET was decommissioned and the World Wide Web made up the bulk of Internet traffic.
- IV. The Internet celebrates its twenty-fifth anniversary, with 10 million people connected.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to topics that involve time lines, the chronological arrangement is appropriate for any topic that involves a series of sequential steps. A scientist might describe the steps in a research project on fruit flies, for example, or a cook might explain the steps in a recipe.

## Arranging Speech Points Using a Spatial Pattern

When the purpose of your speech is to describe or explain the physical arrangement of a place, a scene, or an object, logic suggests that the main points be arranged in order of their physical proximity or direction relative to each other. This calls for the **spatial pattern of arrangement**. For example, you can select a spatial arrangement when your speech provides the audience with a "tour" of a particular place:

**THESIS STATEMENT:** El Morro National Monument in New Mexico is captivating for its variety of natural and historical landmarks.

- I. Visitors first encounter an abundant variety of plant life native to the high-country desert.
- II. Soon visitors come upon an age-old watering hole that has receded beneath the 200-foot cliffs.
- III. Beyond are the famous cliff carvings made by hundreds of travelers over several centuries of exploration in the Southwest.
- IV. At the farthest reaches of the magnificent park are the ancient ruins of a pueblo dwelling secured high atop "the Rock."

In a speech describing a computer company's market growth across various regions of the country, a student speaker uses the following spatial arrangement:

**THESIS STATEMENT:** Sales of Digi-Tel Computers have grown in every region of the country.

- I. Sales are strongest in the Eastern Zone.
- II. Sales are growing at a rate of 10 percent quarterly in the Central Zone.
- III. Sales are up slightly in the Mountain Zone.
- IV. Sales in the Western Zone are lagging behind the other regions.

## Arranging Speech Points Using a Causal (Cause-Effect) Pattern

Some speech topics represent cause-effect relationships. Examples might include (1) events leading to higher interest rates, (2) reasons students drop out of college, and (3) causes of spousal abuse. In speeches on topics such as these, the speaker relates something known to be a "cause" to its "effects." The main points in a **causal (cause-effect) pattern of arrangement** usually take the following form:

- I. Cause
- II. Effect

Sometimes a topic can be discussed in terms of multiple causes for a single effect, or a single cause for multiple effects:

### Multiple Causes for a Single Effect (Reasons Students Drop Out of College)

- I. Cause 1 (lack of funds)
- II. Cause 2 (unsatisfactory social life)
- III. Cause 3 (unsatisfactory academic performance)
- IV. Effect (drop out of college)

### Single Cause for Multiple Effects (Reasons Students Drop Out of College)

- I. Cause (lack of funds)
- II. Effect 1 (lowered earnings over lifetime)
- III. Effect 2 (decreased job satisfaction over lifetime)
- IV. Effect 3 (increased stress level over lifetime)

Some topics are best understood by presenting listeners with the effect(s) first and the cause(s) subsequently. In an informative speech on the 1988 explosion of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, for instance, a student speaker arranges his main points as follows:

- THISIS STATEMENT: The explosion of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, killed 270 people and resulted in the longest-running aviation investigation in history.
- I. (Effect) Two hundred and fifty-nine passengers and crew members died; an additional eleven people on the ground perished.
  - II. (Effect) To date, it is the longest-running aviation investigation in history.
  - III. (Cause) The court found that the cause was a terrorist act; specifically, a bomb planted by Libyan citizen Al Megrahi.
  - IV. (Cause) Many people believe that Megrahi did not act alone, if he acted at all.

In this case, the speaker presents the effects of the airplane explosion as the first two main points. He subsequently addresses the causes of the explosion in the ensuing main points.

## Arranging Speech Points Using a Problem-Solution Pattern

The **problem-solution pattern of arrangement** organizes main points both to demonstrate the nature and significance of a problem and to provide justification for a proposed solution. This type of arrangement can be as general as two main points:

- I. Problem (define what it is)
- II. Solution (offer a way to overcome the problem)

However, many problem-solution speeches require more than two points to adequately explain the problem and to substantiate the recommended solution:

- I. The nature of the problem (identify its causes, incidence, etc.)
- II. Effects of the problem (explain why it's a problem, for whom, etc.)
- III. Unsatisfactory solutions (discuss those that have not worked)
- IV. Proposed solution (explain why it's expected to work)

Following is a partial outline of a persuasive speech about teen pregnancy arranged in a problem-solution format (see also Chapter 26):

- THISIS STATEMENT: Once you realize the nature and probable causes of the problem of teen pregnancy, it should be clear that current solutions remain unsuccessful and an alternative solution—peer counseling—should be considered.
- I. Early unwed pregnancies
    - A. Average age of teen mothers
    - B. National and local incidence
  - II. Probable causes of teen pregnancy
    - A. Lack of knowledge about contraception
    - B. Lack of motivation to use contraception
    - C. Dysfunctional social relationships
  - III. Unsuccessful solutions
    - A. School-based sex education
    - B. Mass-media campaigns encouraging abstinence
  - IV. Peer counseling as a possible solution
    - A. How peer counseling works
    - B. Peer counseling coupled with school-based sexuality curriculum

## Arranging Speech Points Using a Narrative Pattern

Storytelling is often a natural and effective way to get your message across. In the **narrative pattern of arrangement**, the speech consists of a story or a series of short stories, replete with characters, settings, plot, and vivid imagery. However, most speeches built largely upon a story (or a series of stories) are likely to incorporate elements of other organizational arrangements described in the chapter. For example, you might present the story in a time sequence, thus using a chronological design. Or the story could be organized in an effect-cause design, in which you first reveal why something happened (such as a drunken driving accident) and then describe the events that led up to the accident (the causes).

Whatever the structure, simply telling a story is no guarantee of giving a good speech. Any speech should include a clear thesis, a preview, well-organized main points, and effective transitions. In a speech entitled "Tales of the Grandmothers,"<sup>2</sup> professor of communication Anita Taylor illustrates her thesis — that the U.S economy would not be what it is today without the range of "home work" that women have traditionally performed — by relating an extended story about her female ancestors, beginning in 1826. Although the story dominates the speech, Taylor frequently leaves off and picks up its thread in order to orient her listeners and drive home her theme. In addition to explicitly stating her thesis, Taylor pauses to preview main points:

My grandmothers illustrate the points I want to make. . . .

Taylor also makes frequent use of transitions, including internal previews, summaries, and simple signposts, to help her listeners stay on track:

But, let's go on with Luna Puffer Squire Nairn's story.

And here, Taylor signals the conclusion:

So here we are today. . . . And finally. . . .

### Arranging Speech Points Using a Circular Pattern

In the **circular pattern of arrangement**, the speaker develops one idea, which leads to another, which leads to a third, and so forth, until he or she arrives back at the speech thesis.<sup>3</sup> This type of organization can be useful when you want listeners to follow a particular line of reasoning, especially when your main goal is persuasion. In a speech on the role that friendship plays in physical and mental well-being, a student speaker showed how acts of consideration and kindness lead to more friendships, which in turn lead to more social support, which then results in improved mental and physical health. Each main point leads directly into another main point, with the final main point leading back to the thesis.

**Checklist**

**Matching the Organizational Pattern to the Audience**

- \_\_\_ 1. Does the arrangement move the speech along in a logical and convincing fashion?
- \_\_\_ 2. Do my ideas flow naturally from one point to another, leading to a satisfying conclusion?
- \_\_\_ 3. Does the organizational pattern lend my speech momentum?
- \_\_\_ 4. Does the organizational plan convey the information listeners expect or need in a way that they will be able to grasp?

### Public Speaking in Cultural Perspective Arrangement Formats and Audience Diversity

Studies confirm that the way you organize your ideas affects your audience's understanding of them.<sup>1</sup> Another factor that may affect how we organize relationships among ideas is culture.<sup>2</sup> Are certain organizational formats better suited to certain cultures? Consider the chronological arrangement format. It assumes a largely North American and Western European orientation to time because these cultures generally view time as a linear (or chronological) progression in which one event follows another along a continuum, with events strictly segmented. In contrast, some Asian, African, and Latin American cultures view time more fluidly, with events occurring simultaneously or cyclically.<sup>3</sup> Thus, when a speaker follows a chronological arrangement of the typical linear fashion, audience members from cultures with different time orientations may have difficulty making the connections among the main points. For these audiences, an alternative arrangement, such as the narrative or circular pattern, may be a more appropriate form in which to express speech ideas.

1. R. G. Smith, "Effects of Speech Organization upon Attitudes of College Students," *Speech Monographs* 18 (1951): 547-49; E. Thompson, "An Experimental Investigation of the Relative Effectiveness of Organizational Structure in Oral Communication," *Southern Speech Journal* 26 (1960): 59-69.
2. Devorah A. Lieberman, *Public Speaking in the Multicultural Environment*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1997).
3. Edward T. Hall, *The Dance of Life: Other Dimensions of Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1983); J. K. Burgoon, D. B. Buller, and W. G. Woodall, *Nonverbal Communication: The Unspoken Dialogue* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).

