

How is text organized in academic writing?

STEP

1

7

'Order is never observed; it is disorder that attracts attention.'

Eliphaz Levi

A Reflection

What are the functions of the parts of speech in English?

- Based on your analysis of the passage below, complete the table with the appropriate information.

The organization of text in academic writing can initially appear a mystery. However, careful study soon reveals that the basic principles are relatively simple. Therefore, it is important to focus your attention on developing your understanding of this knowledge.

Part of speech	Example(s) from passages	Further information
Noun		
	appear; reveals; is;	
		Describes (modifies) the noun/pronoun.
	initially; soon	
		Can replace a noun.
Conjunction		
Preposition		

B Contextualization

Read these two passages. Decide which sounds more 'natural' and typical of academic English.

Passage A

Important in the development of discourse analysis is the work of text grammarians. Such grammarians view texts as elements strung together in definable relationships ... closely related to such work is that of J. Firbas and F. Danes in the Prague School in the 1970s ... There has also been research on anaphora, topic progression, and ... grammatical choices at clause level (such as tense, voice, aspects and modality).

Passage B

Text grammarians have played an important part in the development of discourse analysis. Elements strung together as definable relationships are the way in which grammarians view texts ... In the 1970s in ... the Prague School were J. Firbas and F. Danes, whose work is closely related to this... Tense, voice, aspects and modality (grammatical choices), as well as anaphora and topic progression, have been some of the major research areas.

Texts from, and adapted from McArthur, T. (ed.) (1992). *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

c Analysis

What is the function of each main word class in English?

A good understanding of the different types of words (parts of speech) is integral to understanding the key principles of organization in English.

Part of speech	Example(s) from passage	Further information
Noun	organization; text; mystery; study	Refers to a person, place or object which forms the subject or object of the sentence. Generally appears with an ARTICLE or DETERMINER .
Verb	appear; reveals; is; developing	Describes what the subject does – relating to events, actions, states of being.
Adjective	basic; simple	Describes (modifies) the noun.
Adverb	initially; soon	Describes (modifies) adverbs and adjectives.
Pronoun	it	Can replace a noun.
Conjunction	however; therefore	Links sentences together.
Preposition	of; in	Precedes nouns and pronouns, indicating a range of different relationships including space, time, cause, agent, possession.

Key organizational principles:

- the basic word order of English is **SUBJECT–VERB–OBJECT**
- adjectives come before nouns
- the position of adverbs is flexible – if in doubt, place them in **MID-POSITION**
- prepositions come before nouns

What are the key principles of organization in English?

Having looked at word order, we now turn to how content is organized in English. Two main principles govern this: old information comes before new information; and topic (general information) comes before comment (specific information); see below. Examples of good practice come from passage A, the original piece of writing on page 71.

Principle 1: old information precedes new information

'Old' information here means information the reader is already familiar with. This information may already have been discussed in a previous paragraph, or may be 'common knowledge' and need no introduction. New information – the information which we are waiting for – comes at the end of the sentence. This principle is known as **END-WEIGHTING**.

Old information	New information
Such grammarians	view texts as elements strung together in definable relationships
Closely related to such work	is that of J. Firbas and F. Danes

Here, 'new information' quickly becomes 'old information' as the text progresses. This adds to the cohesion of a text by creating a chain between ideas.

Principle 2: topic precedes comment

We need to understand what the topic is before we move on to making a comment about it. Compare this to looking at a painting in an art gallery: most people would look at the whole painting first – to get an idea of what it is about – before looking at the interesting details.

Topic	Comment
Important in the development of discourse analysis	is the work of text grammarians
Grammatical choices at clause level	(such as tense, voice, aspect and modality)

In academic writing, this will often express itself as theory–example. This principle is particularly important in relation to increasing the cohesion of your written text (see Step 29).

What flexibility is there in the order that text is organized?

As noted above, academic writing in English follows two main principles in terms of its organization. However, depending on the particular emphasis you may want to put on a sentence, there is some flexibility. For example, some sentences may be **FRONT-WEIGHTED** rather than **END-WEIGHTED** (i.e., the new information precedes the old information) and in others the comment may come before the topic. The reasons for doing this are:

- **Surprise:** doing the unexpected is a good way of generating interest
- **Explanation:** justifying a situation before it happens, so the reader is prepared
- **Persuasion:** putting your key information first may help to convince your reader
- **Clarity:** changing the structure of the sentence may aid understanding

Front-weighting can be done in various ways, as shown below. These strategies are developed in more detail elsewhere – predominantly Unit E (see Steps 21–25).

Strategy 1: Changing the order of CLAUSES will change the emphasis of the sentence.
End-weighted (EW): I am not clear about how text is organized because of my difficulties in English.
Front-weighted (FW): As a result of my difficulties in English, I am not clear how the text is organized.

Strategy 2: Clefting (using cleft sentences) places a particular clause at the beginning of the sentence, giving it prominence.
EW: The emphasis of the sentence is changed by clefting.
FW: What clefting does is to change the emphasis of the sentence.

Strategy 3: Using the passive places the object at the beginning of the sentence, changing the emphasis.
EW: The Online Writing Lab at Purdue University has created many academic writing resources.
FW: Many academic writing resources have been created by the Online Writing Lab at Purdue University.

Useful phrases which can introduce a topic:

- considering ...
- regarding ...
- talking of ...
- speaking of ...
- with regard to ...
- as for ...



Activation

Write a paragraph describing your area of study, paying close attention to the two principles outlined on pages 72–73.



Personalization

- Consider whether your writing follows the two key principles of organization in English.
 - Go through and mark it appropriately to check – ‘O’ for old information, ‘N’ for new, ‘T’ for topic and ‘C’ for comment.
 - Wherever you do not follow these principles, try to present the information in a more orthodox way.
- In your writing, consider whether there are any points where you use front-weighting strategies.
 - If not, practise them. Look through your previous writing and identify sentences which may benefit from this.



Extension

- Steps 28 and 29 look at **COHERENCE** and **COHESION**, both of which are fundamental to good text organization.
- Step 30 focuses on **LINKING DEVICES** – useful pieces of language which clearly show relationships within the text.
- Step 43 discusses **punctuation**, an important aspect of text organization.
- Unit J examines **proofreading strategies**, which may assist you in checking that your writing has suitable organization and that **WORD CLASSES** are used appropriately.