**Chapter 2:** Discovering and Planning

1. Discovering Topics
2. Generating Ideas
3. Organizing Information
4. Planning in Digital Environments

# **Discovering Topics**

English is a topic-centered language. In every paragraph, or any longer text, the writer focuses on discussing a single main topic. All the details provided are used to support his ideas about that topic. In all good paragraphs you will therefore find three essential elements, i.e. a topic, a main idea, and some details. In relation to this, your understanding of a paragraph depends on your skill to determine the topic and main idea.

### Topic

A topic is one thing the whole paragraph is about. It is the unifying factor, which every sentence and idea contained in the paragraph relate to. To find the topic of a paragraph, ask yourself this question: “Which person, event, practice, theory, or idea is most frequently mentioned or referred to in the paragraph?” Usually, the topic of a paragraph can be expressed in one word or a phrase consisting of two or more words. That’s why a topic could also be defined as the word or phrase that best describes what all of the sentences in the paragraph are about. To illustrate, let’s use the following paragraph.

Computer chips have changed our way of life. With computer chips, we can make very small computers. Space scientists use these small computers in satellites and space ships. Large companies use these small computers for business. We can make very small calculators with computer chips. Some calculators are as small as a credit card, and these calculators are not very expensive. Computer chips are also used for making digital watches. A normal watch has a spring and moving hands, but a digital watch has no moving parts. A digital watch shows the time and date with numbers, and some digital watches even have an alarm and a stopwatch. The computer chip makes all of this possible.

Explanation:

The phrase “computer chips”, as indicated by the underlining, is the most frequently mentioned thing in this paragraph. It is the one that best describes what all of the sentences in the paragraph are about. Thus, this is the topic of the paragraph.

Most paragraphs state the topic, but some writers frequently imply the topic. Thus, to identify the topic, readers have to synthesize, or combine; different words in the paragraph to be useful, the topic you select or create should be general enough to include everything discussed in the paragraph. At the same time, it should be specific enough to exclude what isn’t. To illustrate, read the following paragraph.

Traffic is directed by color. Pilot instrument panels, landing strips, road and water crossings are regulated by many colored lights and signs. Factories use color to distinguish between thoroughfares and work areas. Danger zones are painted in special colors. Lubrication points and removable parts are accentuated by color. Pipers for transporting water, steam, oil, chemicals, and compressed air, are designated by different colors. Electrical wires and resistances are color-coded.

Explanation:

In this paragraph, the topic is not directly stated. However, by considering the whole sentence, it is clear that the paragraph discusses about the uses of color in modern technological instrument. This is the topic of the paragraph.

Here is another example.

Frances Wright was a brilliant and determined woman who believed that she could have changed an unjust world. Inspired by her belief, Wright founded, in 1826, an experimental community called Nashoba. It was to be a place where black men and women could work together until they were able to purchase their freedom from slavery. But for all its good intentions, the community was a failure. Plagued by bad weather and illness, Nashoba produced nothing but debts. By 1830, it was only a memory, forgotten by everyone but the people who helped start it.

Explanation:

Initially, as you begin reading this paragraph, you might think that “Nashoba” is the topic. But as you continue reading, you discover that the paragraph does not focus on the working of the community called Nashoba. Instead it focuses on the community’s failure. However, the word failure does not appear until the fourth sentence of the paragraph. In order to express the precise topic of the paragraph, i.e. “failure of Nashoba“, you have to construct it by combining words from different sentence.

**Main Idea**

A main idea is what the author says, thinks, or wants to communicate about the topic. It is the central or most important thought in the paragraph. Every other sentence and idea in the paragraph is related to the main idea. The main idea is usually directly stated by the writer in a sentence called the topic sentence which is usually but not always placed in the beginning of the paragraph. The topic sentence tells what the rest of the paragraph is about.

Since the main idea is what the author says, thinks, or wants to communicate about the topic, to determine it, you should first decide what the topic of the paragraph is. Then ask yourself these questions: What is the main idea—what is the author trying to say about the topic? Which sentence states the main idea? To illustrate, let’s take the paragraph about “computer chips” above. The whole sentences in the paragraph explained what the writer thinks about computer chips. He shows that computer chips are used to make very small computers, calculators, and digital watches which have changed our way of life. This idea is stated in the first sentence which runs “Computer chips have changed our way of life.” This is the main idea of the paragraph.

Occasionally, a writer does not directly state the main idea of a given paragraph in a topic sentence. Instead, he or she leaves it up to the reader to infer, or reason out, what the main idea of the paragraph is. This type of paragraph contains only details or specifics which relate to a given topic and which substantiate an unstated main idea. To read this type of paragraph, start as you would for paragraphs with stated main idea. Ask yourself the question for finding the topic: What is the one thing the author is discussing throughout the paragraph? Then try to think of a sentence about the topic that all the details included in the paragraph would support.

Read the paragraph in the example below. First, identify the topic. Then study the details and think of a general statement that all the details in the paragraph would support or prove.

Thomas Alva Edison invented or improved on the telegraph, phonograph, stock ticker, microphone, telephone, light bulb, battery, motion picture projector, and many other things. He held more than 1,300 US and foreign patents and was the first American director of a research laboratory for inventors. His various companies later combined to become General Electric.

Explanation:

In this paragraph the writer returns again and again to Thomas Alva Edison. Therefore the topic this paragraph is “Thomas Alva Edison”. Having been identifying this topic, it is not hard to figure out what the author wants to say about it. The sentences in the paragraph combine to suggest a main idea that would, if put into a sentence, read something like this: “Thomas Alva Edison was a great inventor.” This is the main idea.

# Generating Ideas

Before you can begin to write you have to have something to write about. This step of the writing process is called generating ideas. The activities in this module will help you with this step in your writing.

**Pre-writing task**

Look at the following questions, think about or discuss your answers with others if you are in a group:

* What are the advantages of the written word over the spoken word?
* Give examples of different types of writing you have done.
* Why should you consider your audience before starting to write?
* What steps did you go through before you began your writing task?
* How do you usually get ideas for writing?
* What are the advantages of writing down ideas before you start writing?
* What difficulties have you encountered in the past when writing in English?

**Step 1: Brainstorming**

The first step when writing an essay is to brainstorm. This means putting down on paper all your ideas associated with the topic that you want to write about. There are many ways to do this. How have you brainstormed in the past? Here are examples of three of the most popular ways of formulating ideas.

1. ***Listing***

This means that you make lists of similar ideas to form paragraphs. For example, if you were asked to write about advertising you might list the following:

1. Introduction and definition of advertising

Examples of most common types of adverts:TV, magazines, newspapers,buses, centres of towns, etc.

1. Arguments in support of having advertisements. ***(main idea)***

* *Advertising creates markets, therefore goods are cheaper.*
* *Purpose is to inform the public about the product.*
* *Consumers are made aware of availability of product.*
* *TV is free to viewers because of the revenue from advertising.*
* *Small ads. are a service to the community as they provide information about houses, jobs, births, deaths, etc. (supporting ideas)*

1. Arguments against having advertisements. ***(main idea)***

* *Advertisements are a form of brainwashing.*
* *They create a demand for unnecessary things.*
* *They adds to pollution by creating a "throw away"  society.*
* *They preys on human emotions, i.e. fear, anxiety, love.*
* *They are annoying and continually interrupt TV viewing. (supporting ideas)*

1. Discussion and Opinion

* *Advertisements have an important and beneficial role in society.*
* *Cultural differences are shown through a country's a*

In listing method, , at the top of your list write your topic. Writing out your topic helps you focus on it. Then, list the ideas you think of in the order that they come to you. You can use many lists to find supporting points for each of your ideas. The lists below use the sample essay topic above to show you what idea lists might look like. Here is another example:

What is an important goal I have for the next few years?

* *finishing school*
* *getting a better job*
* *keeping in touch with my friends and family*
* *learning a new language*

How can I achieve my goal?

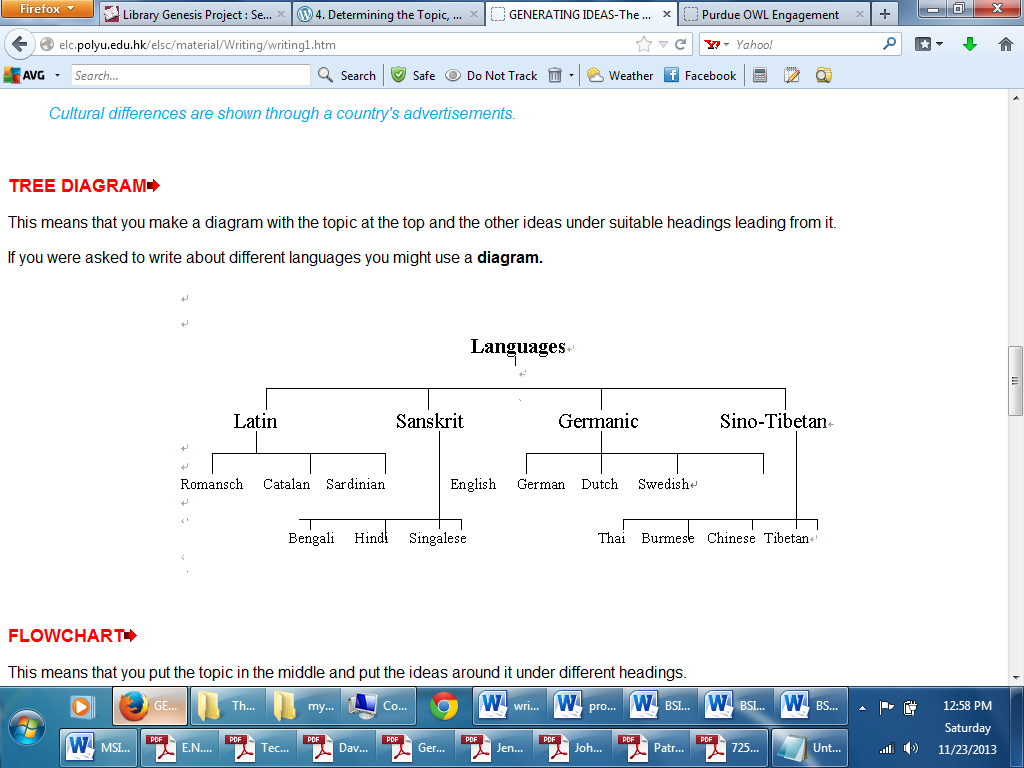
* *to finish school, I can figure out what my goals are for school, find a school that fits my goals, and apply to schools and for financial aid*
* *to get a better job, I can finish school, learn a new language, search for jobs, prepare my applications, and make a list of people who will give me a good reference*
* *to keep in touch with my friends and family, I can make a list of everyone’s contact information, like addresses, phone numbers, and email*
* *to learn a new language, I can pick what language I want to learn, get a dictionary, and find a class*

To practice with this brainstorming method, make your own idea list using the sample essay topic.

1. ***Tree Diagram***

This means that you make a diagram with the topic at the top and the other ideas under suitable headings leading from it.

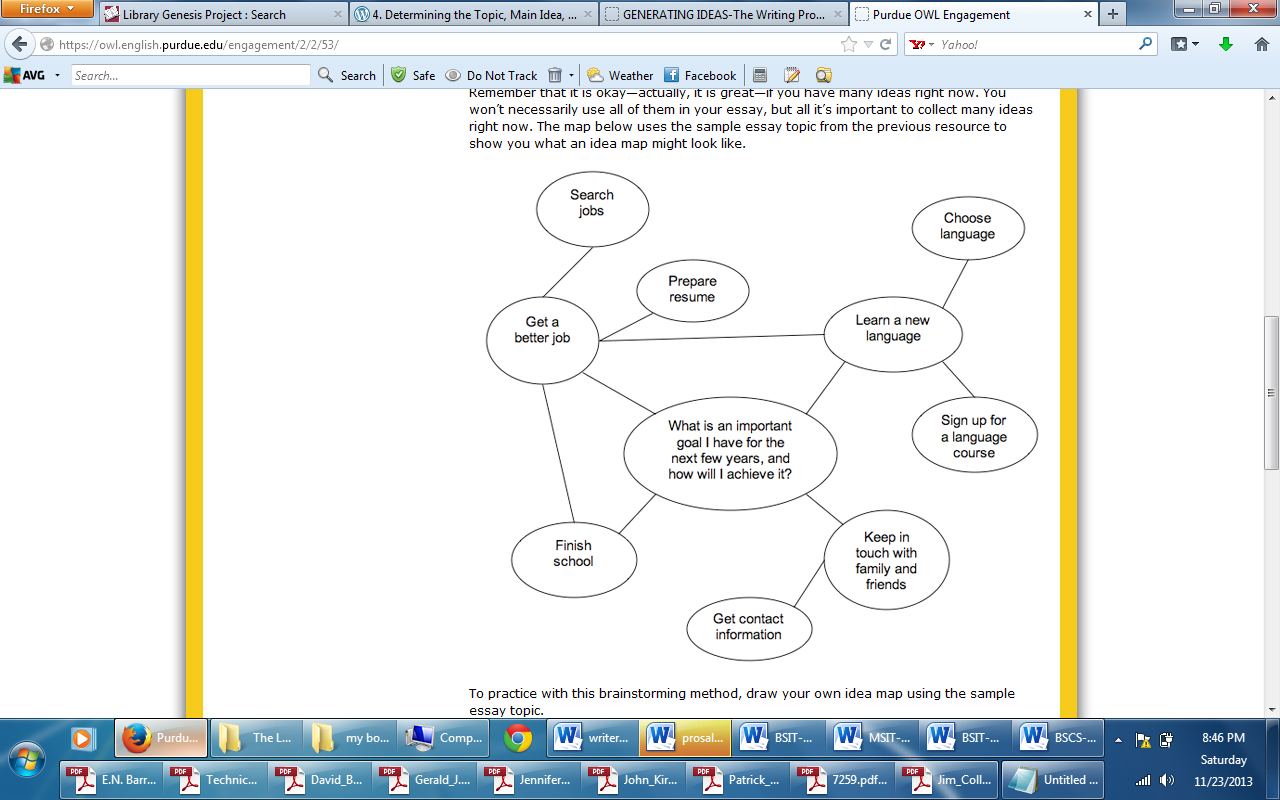
If you were asked to write about different languages you might use a **diagram**.



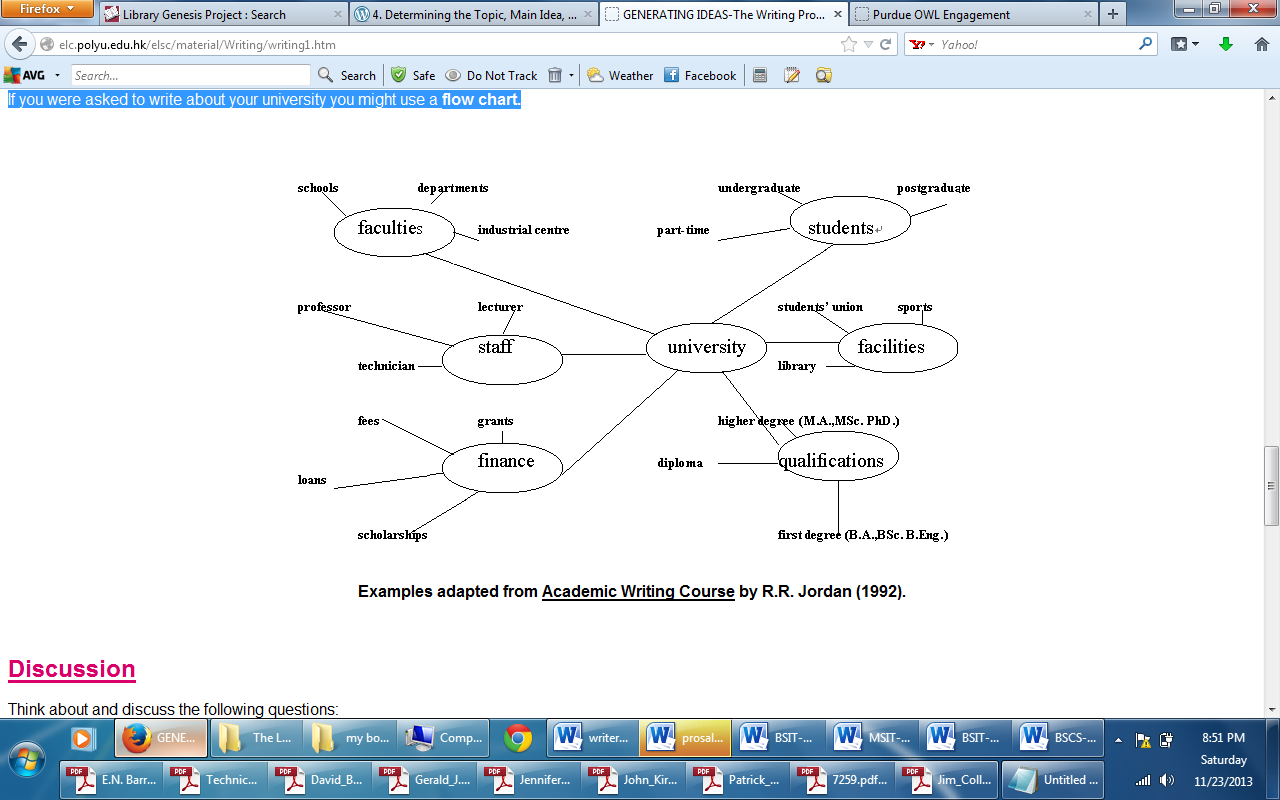
To practice with this tree diagram method, make your own idea tree diagram using the sample essay topic.

1. ***Idea Map***

Drawing a map of your ideas is helpful in many ways. Flow chart is another term used for Idea Maps. First, people often find that seeing a visual representation of their thoughts helps them to add more ideas and sort through them. Also, drawing a map might help you see how your thoughts connect to one another, which will help you when you begin organizing your essay.

  
In the center of the map, write your topic and draw a circle around it. When you come up with a new idea, write it down, draw a circle around it, and draw a line to show how it connects to the topic in the center and/or the other ideas you’ve written down. Look at the main ideas you’ve written and see if you can think of other ideas that connect to them. Remember that it is okay—actually, it is great—if you have many ideas right now. You won’t necessarily use all of them in your essay, but all it’s important to collect many ideas right now. The map below uses the sample essay topic from the previous resource to show you what an idea map might look like.

Here is another example. In this example we are goingto write about your university.



To practice with this brainstorming method, draw your own idea map using the sample essay topic. During this activity also think about and discuss the following questions:

* Have you used any brainstorming methods before?
* Think of the advantages and/or disadvantages of using the suggested and / or alternative methods of brainstorming.

**Activity 1**

Choose one of the topics:

* FESTIVALS
* MOBILE PHONES
* STUDYING AT UNIVERSITY

Or you may choose a topic of your own. Say the first idea which springs to mind. This can be done as a group activity by listing all the ideas on the whiteboard. Keep writing ideas until you cannot think of any more ideas on the subject.

**Activity 2**

Try brainstorming one of the following topics. Write down as many ideas as possible connected with the topic. You may use the listing, tree diagram, flow chart or any other method.

* Transportation in Pakistan
* Terrorism
* AIDS
* Pollution

If you have a partner, look at his/her list of ideas from Activity 2. See if you can suggest any more ideas for his/her topic and if she/he can suggest any more ideas for your topic.

*Generating ideas in this way may seem awkward or even a waste of time at first. However, writers have found that using some sort of brainstorming method allows them to think of aspects of a topic they have overlooked or neglected and helps them to decide what is important and what is not.*

# Organizing Information

For many kinds of reading, such as reading textbooks or articles in your own field, in addition to the author’s topic and main idea, you also need to recognize how he developed them. That way of idea development is called the pattern of organization.

The link between clear, logical organization and effective writing is powerful, both for the "reader" and the "writer." For the writer, a well organized outline of information serves as a blue print for action. It provides focus and direction as the writer composes the document, which helps to ensure that the stated purpose is fulfilled. For the reader, clear organization greatly enhances the ease with which one can understand and remember the information being presented. People seek out patterns to help make sense of information. When the reader is not able to find a pattern that makes sense, chaos and confusion abound. Effective writing, then, begins with a clearly organized set of ideas following a logical, consistent pattern. Thus, one of the most important decisions a writer makes concerns the pattern of organization that is used to structure and order information.

There are many patterns a writer can use to organize his/her ideas. The specific pattern (or combination of patterns) chosen depends upon the particular topic and the objectives the writer has identified for the document. There is no rule to follow in choosing a pattern of organization; one must simply think carefully about which pattern makes the most sense in helping the reader to better understand and remember the information. There are many different ways of organizing the same information, and often two or more different organizational patterns are combined to create a final outline of information.

The most commonly used patterns of organization. In some paragraph information are presented in sequence of events, some others in sequence of steps, in comparison and contrast, in cause and effects, in list of characteristics, or in the mixture of two different paragraph types. Once you recognize the pattern, you will understand and follow their ideas more efficiently. **According to Mikulecky and Jeffries (2007: 134), there are six major patterns of organization, i.e. listing, sequence, comparison/contrast, cause/effect, problem/solution, and extended definition. The following explanations are based on Mikulecky and Jeffries’ work.**

**1. ListingPatterns**

In the listing pattern, the writer states the main idea in the form of a generalization and gives a list of details or examples to support that general statement. Common key words/phrases found in the main idea are: many, several, a number of, a variety of, a few, kinds of. Transitional words/phrases used in this organizational pattern are: for example, for instance, first, second, another, also, besides, in addition, final, last, most important. Look at the following paragraph.

There are several different theories about the origin of the Moon. One theory, called the fission’ theory, states that early in the life of Earth, a piece broke off, and that piece became the Moon. A second, closely related theory is that the Moon is composed of several pieces of Earth that broke away from our planet. Yet another theory is that the Moon formed elsewhere in the solar system and was captured by Earth’s gravity.’ The final theory states that a huge piece of planetary rock struck Earth and broke up into pieces. One of the pieces became the Moon. (From: Mikulecky, B. S. and Jeffries, L. 2007: 135)

Explanation:

This paragraph discusses about “Theories about the origin of the Moon”. This is the topic. In relation to the topic, writer states, “There are several different theories about the origin of the Moon.” This is the main idea. To make this idea convincing, he lists four theories. That’s why the organizational pattern of this paragraph is listing.

**2. Chronological Patterns**

**A chronological pattern of organization arranges information according to a progression of time, either forward or backward. When a topic is best understood in terms of different segments of time, a chronological format works well. For example, topics of an historical nature are best organized using this pattern.**

**When using a chronological pattern, each main section of information represents a particular period of time, and the sub-points contained within each main section refer to significant events that occurred within that time frame. A variation of this organizational pattern involves dividing a topic into "past-present-future" or" before-during-after" segments.**

**For example, suppose a writer's stated purpose is to describe the historical development and evolution of the city of Seattle. Assuming that Seattle is 100 years old, the writer could organize the information by grouping it into four 25-year chunks. In this case, the sub-points within each main section of time represent the most significant events that occurred during that particular time frame. Notice that by breaking the 100 year span into distinct 25 year chunks, the writer can create an outline that follows the guidelines of outlining described under "Principles of Organizing." This outline contains four mutually exclusive and balanced sections of information.**

**3. Sequence Pattern**

In the sequence pattern, the writer explains the main idea with a series of events or steps in a process that follow one after the other in time order. The common key word/phrases in the main idea are: began, account, story, process, history, sequence. The common signal words/phrases are: first, second, then, next, after, while, since, then, soon, finally, at last, in 1965, last June, later, over time, the next step, the following week. Look at the following paragraph.

The years between 1918 and 1945 brought violence and upheaval to the newly formed Polish nation. In 1918, Poland was declared independent, and army officer Jozef Pilsudski took control of the government. After 1926, the government became a dictatorship, first under Pilsudski and later, after his death in 1935, under officers loyal to him. The officers, however, did not rule for long. In 1939, Germany and Russia invaded Poland, and both powers divided up the country. During the war years that followed, the Germans murdered anywhere from three to five and a half million Polish Jews; they killed more than half of the population of Warsaw, and the capital itself was completely destroyed. Warsaw, once one of the most beautiful capitals n Europe, was reduced to rubble.

Explanation:

This paragraph focuses on “political events in Poland between the years 1918 and 1945,” and this is the topic of the paragraph. In addition to the sequence of political dates and events, this paragraph also expresses the writer’s idea that “Poland underwent violence and upheaval during 1918-1945.”  This is the main idea of the paragraph, which is contained in the first sentence. So, this sentence functions as the topic sentence.

The following paragraph also employs the sequence organizational pattern. However, different from the paragraph above which uses a series of events, the next paragraph uses a series of steps (process).

Not all stars are the same age, so it is possible to see stars at every stage of their life cycle. From their observations, astrophysicists can explain the process of the formation of a star. A star begins life inside a nebula, a huge cloud of gas and dust in outer space. Over time, the force of gravity pulls some of the gas and dust together to form into clumps. Then the temperature inside the nebula begins to rise. Next, several clumps come together and become denser and hotter, and they form a protostar(an early form of a star). After that, the protostar continues to grow until it has become about as large as our Sun. At that point, nuclear reactions begin to occur in its core (center), and these reactions send energy to the surface of the protostar. Finally, the energy escapes as heat and light and a new star begins to shine.

**Explanation:**

This paragraph discusses about “The process of the formation of a star”. This is the topic. According to the writer, “a star is formed in a process during which clumps of gas and dust form a protostar that becomes large and hot.” This is the main idea.

**4. Comparison/Contrast Pattern**

In the comparison/contrast pattern, the writer’s main idea is a general statement about two things and how they are similar and/or different. A comparison can include both similarities and differences, or only the similarities. A contrast states only differences. The common key words/phrases in the main idea: similarities, differences, both, in common, same, different, compare, comparison. The usual signal words/phrases for similarities are similarly, also, in the same way, as, like, both, in common. The common signal words/phrases for differences are: however, but, on the other hand, although, while, in contrast, than, conversely, yet, unlike. Look at the following paragraph.

When Gerald Ford, the thirty-eighth president of the U.S., came to office, he was fond of emphasizing his resemblance to one of his famous predecessors, Harry S. Truman. Like Ford, Truman had been a vice president who became president only by chance. Truman took over when Franklin Roosevelt died in office, a circumstance that resembled Ford’s own ascent to the presidency when Richard Nixon resigned from office. Truman, like Ford, was not an intellectual, and he tended to exaggerate his lack of learning, insisting that he was just a simple man with simple tastes. Ford also like to emphasize that both he and Truman came to office at a difficult time. Truman led the nation during the final months of World War II, and Ford entered office after the nation had been faced with the Watergate scandals.

Explanation:

This paragraph focuses on some similarities between Ford and Truman. This is the topic of the paragraph. The main idea appears in the first sentence: “Gerald Ford liked to point out how similar he was to Harry Truman. The remaining supporting sentences develop that main idea by listing the similarities between them.

Different from the paragraph above, which focuses on similarities, the following paragraph focuses on differences.

Earth differs greatly from its two closest neighboring planets, Venus and Mars. The Venusian and Martian atmospheres are composed almost entirely of carbon dioxide, while Earth’s atmosphere contains very little. The dominant material in our atmosphere is nitrogen (77 percent). The other major component of Earth’s atmosphere is oxygen (21 percent), a gas that is almost nonexistent on Venus and Mars. Our planet has an abundance’ of water, which covers about 70 percent of Earth’s surface and supports life on our planet. In contrast, Venus and Mars are extremely dry planets and incapable of supporting life.

Explanation:

This paragraph focuses on some differences between Earth and Venus and Mars. This is the topic of the paragraph. The main idea appears in the first sentence: “The Earth differs greatly from that of its two closest neighboring planets, Venus and Mars. The remaining supporting sentences develop that main idea by listing the differences among them.

**5. Cause/Effect Pattern**

In this pattern, the writer’s main idea is that one event or action caused another event or action. Common key words/phrases in the main idea and the signal words for details are the same and often include: causes, leads to, is the cause of results in, creates, brings about, makes, provokes, produces, gives rise to, contributes to, is due to, is the result of, comes from, results from, is produced by, is a consequence of, follows, is caused by. Look at the following paragraph.

There are more old people in the world today because of an increase in medical services. Today, more people can get medical services from doctors and nurses in hospitals and clinics. As a result, fewer people get fatal disease such as yellow fever, malaria, cholera, and typhoid. This decrease in fatal diseases causes a decrease in the number of people who die from these diseases. Because of this decrease in number of deaths, people can live longer today. As a result, there has been an increase in the number of old people living in the world today.

**Explanation:**

The topic of this paragraph is the cause of increase in the number of old people. According to the writer, there are more old people in the world today because of an increase in medical services. This is the main idea. To support his idea, the author shows how the increase in medical services has caused the increase in the number of old people living in the world today.

**6. Problem/Solution Pattern**

In this pattern, the main idea names a problem and indicates that one or more solutions. The paragraph always consists of two parts: 1) a statement and 2) a description and explanation of how it was solved. There are often no signal words for the details. The common key words/phrases in the main idea are situation, trouble, crisis, dilemma or issue. The commonkey words in the body of the paragraph include: solve, solution, resolved. Look at the following paragraph.

Beginning in the 1600s, astronomers had realized that their telescopes had serious limits. They had managed to build stronger and better telescopes, but no matter how strong the new telescopes were, they were less than satisfactory. The astronomers were able to view objects only when the objects were in view of Earth. At the same time, however, Earth’s light and atmosphere made it difficult to see many heavenly objects. Thanks to the Hubble Telescope, this has been solved, because the Hubble is not just a telescope. It is a digital camera on a satellite that travels about 370 miles (600 km) above Earth, making a complete orbit every ninety-seven minutes. Since 1990, Hubble has been able to take digital pictures of planets, galaxies, comets, and more, and these are sent back to Hubble headquarters for scientists to study.

**Explanation:**

The topic of this paragraph is “the problem caused by telescope limitation”. According to the writer, the new Hubble telescope has solved the problem.” This is the main idea.

**7. Extended Definition Pattern**

In this pattern, the writer names a concept or complicated process that the paragraph will define and explain. Usually, the main idea or first sentence of the paragraph states a dictionary definition of the concept or process, followed by a description and/or an explanation. There are usually no signal words for the details. The common key words/phrases in the main idea are: consists of, is, seems to be, are. Look at the following sample paragraph.

A solar eclipse is an astronomical event during which the Moon seems to cover the Sun. When the Moon passes between the Earth and the Sun, all or part of the Sun’s light is blotted out. The Moon, in fact, is much smaller than the Sun, but it is also a great deal closer to the Earth. As a result, both the Sun and the Moon seem to be about the same size to us. During a total eclipse, the Sun, the Moon, and the Earth are all in a straight line and the Moon completely hides the Sun from view. A partial eclipse occurs when the three bodies are not exactly in a straight line. In an annular solar eclipse, the Sun is visible as a bright ring around the Moon because the Moon is farthest from the Earth.

Explanation:

The topic of this paragraph is “Solar eclipse”, whereas the main idea is the one stated in the first sentence, i.e. “A solar eclipse is an astronomical event during which the Moon seems to cover the Sun.”

## Exercises

Read the following paragraphs and determine the topic, the main idea, and the organizational pattern employed in each of them.

Between 1890 and 1900, millions of people from southern and eastern Europe left their home in search of the American dream. The new immigrants had hoped to find a comfortable place where they could settle and live out their lives. But the cities to which they came were not prepared for the new arrivals, and many immigrant families ended up in ugly tenements that were poorly supplied with light, heat and water. They had dreamt of finding work, work that could make them independent, even rich. Instead they found that jobs were scarce. Frequently they had to take jobs for which they were unsuited, and the work left them exhausted and depressed. Many immigrants found that instead of the warm welcome they expected, they were treated as outsiders, with funny customs and even funnier way of speaking.

Human digestion begins when we use our teeth to cut and grind food. As we chew, saliva moistens and softens food so it can be easily swallowed. After being swallowed, the food passes into a tube that connects the mouth and stomach; this tube is called esophagus. After the food reaches the stomach, muscles in the stomach will mix it together and combine it with a gastric juice that consists mostly of water and hydrochloric acid. The gastric juice reduces the food to a liquid that can pass into the small intestine. The passage takes about eight hours. During this time, enzymes break down the food even more, preparing it for absorption into the blood stream.

Liberty Statue is a colossal statue in Liberty Island in the Upper New York Bay, U.S., made to commemorate the friendship of the peoples of the United States and France. Standing 305 feet (93 meters) high including its pedestal, it represents a woman holding a torch in her raised right hand and a tablet bearing the adoption date of the Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776) in her left. The torch, which measures 29 feet (8.8 meters) from the flame tip to the bottom of the handle, is accessible via a 42-foot (12.8-metre) service ladder inside the arm (this ascent was open to the public from 1886 to 1916). An elevator carries visitors to the observation deck in the pedestal, which may also be reached by stairway, and a spiral staircase leads to an observation platform in the figure’s crown.

The atmosphere of Earth acts like any window in serving two very important functions: to let light in and to permit us to look out and to guard Earth from dangerous or uncomfortable things. A normal glazed window lets us keep our house warm by keeping out cold air. In such a way, the Earth’s atmospheric window helps to keep our planet to a comfortable temperature by holding back radiated heat and protecting us from dangerous levels of ultraviolet light. Just like a window which prevents rain, dirt, and unwelcome insects and animals from coming in, scientists have discovered that space is full of a great many very dangerous things against which our atmosphere guards us. (Adapted from: Brandon & Brandon, 2011: 289).

Astronauts face many problems in space caused by weightlessness. One of these problems is floating around the cabin. To solve this problem, astronauts wear shoes that are coated with a special adhesive. This adhesive sticks to the floor of the cabin. Serving food is another problem. It won’t stay put on the table! Experts solved this problem by putting food and drinks in pouches and tubes. It only needs to be mixed with water. Weightlessness also causes problems when an astronaut tries to work. The simple task of turning a wrench or a doorknob can be difficult. Since there is no gravity to keep him down, when he exerts a force in one direction, the opposite force may flip him over completely. To solve this problem, he must be very careful about how much force he uses to do these simple tasks. Here on earth, life is much simpler, thanks to gravity. (From: http://e-writing.wikispaces.com/ Problem+and+Solution+Paragraph)

# Planning in Digital Environments

A digital environment is a created world within a computer, or a group of computers. What becomes interesting is that, unlike in the real world, within this digital world you can record everything that happens and this trace becomes your digital footprint. “Digital signage” is a common term used to display text and/or images, shown in digital formats over the internet or on television. Digital signage is commonly used to advertise products or services as they can offer more animations to entice consumers.

Writing and editing for digital environment (online/web site) are not the same as for print. Online you need to apply different skills and techniques to attract and retain your readers, get your message across effectively and achieve your business objectives.

## Why is writing for the web different?

Reading from computer screens is about 25% slower than reading from paper and usually say that they find reading online text unpleasant. Studies have shown that people are less likely to read long pieces of text on a web page than in printed format.

So, how do people read websites? The answer is: they don’t.Instead, they:

* skim, scan, and select
* browse before exploration
* take quick glances and occasional very brief stops
* read a little at a time, mostly in short burst
* grab what they need and get on towards the goal

For these reasons, it is rarely appropriate to cut and paste from a printed document to produce an identical web version. Therefore you need to develop online contents in a better, more structured and objective way. For this purpose you need:

* Planning of your web content: before you begin writing, you’ll need to plan out the content you need and think about its purpose and objectives
* Writing of your web content: how to write specifically for a web audience
* Measuring of your web content: once you’ve published your content, you’ll want to make sure it’s working for you in the way you’ve hoped

## Preparing Web Contents

Here are some useful guidelines for planning your web content.

Generally speaking, your web content is useless unless it does one or both of the following:

• supports a key business objective (e .g .promotes the university; encourages students to apply)

• supports a user in completing a task (e.g. provides the user with the information they were looking for; helps a student toapply)

So, how do you make sure that all your content is useful? Before you start writing,you need to:

• prepare to create less content

• define your content structure

### Prepare to create less content

Online ,when it comes to informational, marketing or promotional content ,less is always more because:

* **Less content is easier to manage:** When we talk about publishing content on line, we often refer to it “going live”. There are countless ways for web content to die: dead blogs, outdated descriptions, broken links, and irrelevant search engines. Its something to change brand voice in print and forget to do it online; it’s another to neglect content that might mislead users or even expose us to legal action. By publishing less content you’ll have less content to manage.
* **Less content is more user-friendly:** Users want information quickly. If they can’t find what they’re looking for, they’ll feel frustrated and resentful ,and they’ll leave. Too much content means information is harder to find. And that makes it harder for users to complete their task.
* **Less content costs less to create:** By prior it is useful and relevant content over “just in case” content, you’ll free up time and money for things like planning and measurement. Scale back on content by making sure that your website content maps back to key business objectives and user goals.

### Define your objectives

Creating new web pages and filling them with text and images is, technically speaking, really easy. But, just because you can, doesn’t mean you should.

Creating useful, usable content requires research, strategic planning, meaningful metadata, web writing skills, and editorial oversight.

Done well, content can build your brand, improve retention and win loyalty.

Done poorly, it will cause you to lose your audience’s attention and trust.

Analyzing your objectives is the first step in creating web content. You must establish:

• What exactly do you need to achieve? Do you simply want to inform your users, or do you want to persuade, reassure or motivate the motto?

• What outcome do you need? Do you just want your users to “be informed”, or do you want them to take a particular course of action?

For every new page you plan to create, you need ask yourself:

• Why am I creating this page?

• What do I want to say?

• Does the user need it?

• Will they want to read it?

• What do I want the user to do after reading it?

If you can’t answer these questions easily, you need to rethink the objectives of your content.

### Writing your web content

Here we will discuss how to write clear, concise, web-friendly pages that users will find useful and easy to read and which can be more easily retrieved by search engines.

The five main guidelines for writing for the web are to make your content:

1. **Concise:** Text that is poorly written or long-winded will deter readers and could create a bad impression. Try to write in plain English that is accurate, consistent and concise.
2. **Front-load your content:** “Front-loading” your content means putting the conclusion first, followed by the what, how, where, when and why. This allows users to:

• Quickly scan through the opening sentence

• Instantly understand what the paragraph is about

• decide if they want to read the rest of the paragraph or not

The opening paragraph on every page should focus on answering two questions:

• What? (What will users find on this page? What is its function?)

• Why? (Why should they care? What’s in it for them?)

Newspaper articles are good examples of front-loaded content; the opening paragraph is always the conclusion of the article.

Your primary information (the main piece of information or message that you are trying to convey to your user) should be the first thing the user sees. Everything else is secondary information and should follow later. Long and detailed background information can be relegated to the end of the page or moved on to child pages. Similarly, information of interest to a minority of users can be made available through a link without penalizing those readers who don't want it.

**Limit each page to one topic:** Don’t make users click through unnecessary pages when they don’t need to. If you genuinely have a lot of content that is too long o run wieldy on one page, you should split it up over several pages *in a way that makes sense*.

New pages shouldn’t be created just to segment along linear story into multiple pages; having to flick through several pages can be confusing to the reader, slows down reading and makes printing more difficult.

Good web content should be split into coherent chunks that each focus on a certain topic. The guiding principle should be to allow readers to select those topics they care about and only read those pages. Use your homepage or landing page to summarize the main points and put supporting information onto secondary pages, avoiding repetition and duplication of content on different pages.

**Don’t state the obvious but do explain:** Phrases like “Welcome to my website”(when the user has more than likely searched for or followed a link to that website)or “These pages have been designed to make your first few weeks of work with the University easier”(on induction pages aimed at new staff) don’t tell the user anything they didn’t already know.

Similarly, it is not necessary to instruct your readers how to navigate a webpage such as “click here for further details”, “on this website you will find”or “the links on the left will take you to further information”.

Many users will arrive at your web pages by way of a search engine and they may enter the site at any point, by passing your homepage and landing pages in the process. They probably won’t have read all your content in sequence, so each page must be self-explanatory. Link to background or explanatory information to help users, but don’t overdo it; it’s not necessary to link to all pages in the same section if this is already apparent from the navigation, for example.

**Don’t repeat what someone else has said (better) elsewhere:** Keep your pages short and concise by linking out to secondary information rather than reproducing it on your pages. Linking to the owner of the information means that you won’t have to keep monitoring it in order to keep your content up-to-date.

**Scan able:** Skimming instead of reading is a fact of the web and has been confirmed by countless usability studies. Users are often impatient and don’t want to read long continuous blocks of text. They will scan text and pick out keywords, sentences, and paragraphs of interest while skipping over those parts of the text they care less about.

**Structure your content with headings &subheadings:** Edit long passages of text into shorter paragraphs and introduce helpful sub-headings to give users an accurate at-a-glance impression of the page’s content. If you’re adapting a printed document or publication, these sub-headings may not have been present in the original form but this kind of sign posting will be helpful to a web audience trying to find information in a hurry.

Structure your content using two or even three levels of headings (a general page heading plus subheads and sub-subheads when appropriate). Nested headings also allow better access for users with screen readers.

**Use lists:** Break up long lists in sentence or paragraph form and present them as bullet points. This will make them easier to read and scan. Lists are preferable to long paragraphs because they:

• allow users to read the information vertically rather than horizontally

• are easier to scan

• are less intimidating

• are usually more concise

**3Personable:** Stodgy (heavy) paragraphs written in third person are no longer in fashion. The internet has developed into a more personal communication tool. People use the internet to explore in a relaxed nature, not to feel like they are reading from an encyclopedia. We want the website to be somewhere people come to explore without pressure.

Being personal means revealing your personality to the visitor in a fine way. This doesn’t mean putting your photo on the “About us” page; it means writing web content that conveys our personality.

**Use you and we:** You should refer to the University or your School or service in full in the first instance ,but you should refer to “we” or “us” in subsequent sentences.

**Active verbs:** Adopt an active tone when writing; it sounds more direct and professional and helps to build trust with users by reassuring them that we’re taking ownership of what we’ve written.

**Use descriptive link text:** In the same way that bold text stands out to screen-scanning web users, so does link text. Link text such as “click here” won’t make any sense out of context, so is useless to site visitors scanning web pages. Instead, you should use a title that describes where the person will be taken.

### 4Searchable

Writing text with the intention of improving its chances of retrieval by search engines is the single biggest difference between writing for print and the web. There are a number of techniques you can use to improve your pages’ ranking with search engines.

**Title and headlines:** Each page should have a different title that is meaningful and accurately describes the information on the page. Choose words that are repeated in the body text of the page and place the most important keywords at the start of the title.

**Headings & subheadings:** Increased weight is given to words in your text that are emphasized by being headings so choose your headings carefully. However, do not use headings inappropriately or too frequently. The objective is that your text should be readable as well as retrievable.

**Body text:** Try to use the same terms and phrases in your content as your readers use when they talk or write about the subject matter in question. This will make your pages easier to understand for the user and have a higher chance of being picked up in searches.

**Hyperlinks:** Hyperlinked text is given added weight by search engine spiders so try to avoid the “click here” convention referred to earlier. Always hyperlink the relevant words even if that means you need to re-word your sentence to accommodate those keywords.

**Keywords and page description:** Think of the main keywords within your page. Try to use the words a user would enter when searching. Avoid obscure terms, oblique or ambiguous expressions, and puns. Keep it simple.

Include your most important keywords in your opening sentence, repeating or using variants, if possible. However, do not write something that is unclear or avoidably cumbersome. For Search Engine success there is no substitute for relevant content.

### 5Measuring your webcontent

Now that you’ve planned out your content, written it and published it to the website, the next step is to monitor it to make sure it’s achieving the goals you set out in the first stage.Measuring your web content is done in several ways:

**Reviews & updates:** Forthcoming events, latest news, statistics and examples must be refreshed regularly. If users see out-of-date information they will lose trust in the site and become suspicious of the rest of the content.

Build it into your workflow to regularly monitor your site for out of date content. Remove anything that is redundant and update anything that is timely.

Check that any new content added still makes sense and meets your objectives.

**Analyzing web statistics:** We use Google Analytics to monitor visits to the website. The Web Team can generate regular reports for you and offer advice on how to read the report and act on the results. Try to use the language you would use if the reader was sitting across the desk from you.

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