

Organizing Your Argument Summary Transcript

You've come up with a draft thesis statement or research question, you've written your first draft, and you now want to check the flow and structure of your argument.

Let's clear away some misconceptions first:

You may have been told that your introduction can be only one paragraph long. That's practical for shorter papers, but if you're writing a 15-page paper, your introduction can certainly be more than one paragraph long.

You may have been told that the middle of your essay – the body – should contain three points and be three paragraphs long. That's not true, and it isn't practical. Sometimes you'll have four or five points to make, and much of the time, you'll have more than three paragraphs. Imagine, for instance, that you're writing a six-page paper. Are you really going to have paragraphs that are two pages long? No, you're not, because that's far too long.

So let's deal with the structure of your paper first, then return to paragraphing.

One of the best ways to check the flow of your paper and revise it is to do a reverse outline. First, copy your thesis statement or your research question onto a new screen or notebook page. Next, go directly to the end of your paper. What was your conclusion or the answer to your question? Does it match your thesis or answer your research question? If not, then revise your thesis statement or research question to be consistent with that closing answer. If you revise the thesis or question, then put the revised one at the top of a blank screen or notebook page.

Next, read each paragraph of the middle of your paper, and describe the main content of each paragraph in one or two words. Do that for each paragraph, then make a list, in the same order as your paragraphs, on the blank screen or page under your revised thesis or research question.

It might look like this one for a compare and contrast essay:

The research question asked:

How did differences in news coverage between the 2015 CUPE strike and the 2015 public school teachers' strike contribute to different public perspectives of the incidents themselves?

A thesis statement (answer to the question):

As I argue, textual and visual coverage of the CUPE strike included Kelloway et. al's three elements of "perceived injustice, identification, and perceived instrumentality," and thus led to favourable public opinion of this strike. In contrast, coverage of the ETFO strike lacked these elements and focused mostly on union demands and the impact of the strike on children and parents, so did not garner public sympathy.

Reverse outline of the middle of the essay:

Methods – analysis methods, news orgs

CUPE: labour issues covered
ETFO: labour issues omitted
ETFO: what teachers would and would not do
Strategic benefits
ETFO: who gets to speak
ETFO: children's images
ETFO: bosses' images
ETFO: teachers' images
CUPE: who gets to speak
CUPE: images of solidarity

Take a look at this reverse outline. What issues do you see with the order? Is there any repetition? Anything that looks out of place in relation to the question? Anything that doesn't seem to fit with the rest?

A Revised Order

When you do a comparison/contract paper, order is really important. If you start your intro by naming one author or entity first, followed by a second, then you should keep that order through your thesis/research question, right through the middle of your paper to the conclusions.

In the reverse outline, you might have noticed:

The thesis names CUPE first, ETFO second, but the middle of the paper doesn't always follow that order.

There's a long section on ETFO in the middle.

The ETFO paragraph about "who gets to speak" comes quite early, but the CUPE paragraph comes near the end.

The ETFO has three paragraphs about images, and the CUPE single paragraph is out of order, placed right at the end of the middle.

"Strategic benefits" seems out of place, especially given the question and thesis. Is this paragraph relevant?

"Kellerman" is named in the thesis statement, but never explained.

A revised order might be:

Methods – analysis methods, news orgs
Kellerman et. al: explanation and definition
CUPE: labour issues covered
ETFO: labour issues omitted; lists of work to order
CUPE: who gets to speak
ETFO: who gets to speak
CUPE: images of solidarity
ETFO: images of fragmentation, rich bosses
Strategic benefits of positive coverage
Impact on the two unions

Paragraphing

In academic writing, different types of paragraph serve different purposes. For instance, you might write a paragraph that explains the methods you used for data collection, or you might write a paragraph that explains a theory you're applying.

For much of your writing work, though, especially if you're writing an argumentative essay, you'll be showing evidence and analyzing it. For these paragraphs:

State what you're going to show in the first sentence. That is, state the topic or the point you're going to make in this paragraph.

Provide evidence that illustrates the validity of your point. This evidence may be in the form of a quote or quotes, data, statistics, image descriptions, or whatever's appropriate for your field and paper.

Explain what this evidence MEANS in relation to your thesis statement. Analyze the evidence. Answer the "so what?" question.

End with a sentence that states the significance of the evidence and reiterates the point you've demonstrated.

For instance, here's an example from Jonathan Clodman's paper about the CUPE and ETFO strikes of 2015. The first sentence states a contrast in images and stories, while the second hones in on the point about to be made about the CUPE strike ("the faces of the ... picket line"). The text in blue provides solid evidence that supports this statement by including several CITED quotes and descriptions of images. Clodman then tells us what this evidence MEANS, turning to analysis in the yellow highlighted text. The green sentence at the end summarizes the impact on readers, which is directly related to his thesis statement, shown earlier.

Lastly, coverage for these two incidents of job action differed in the featuring of individual faces and stories. For the CUPE strike, there was a demonstrated emphasis on what one reporter called the "faces of the . . . picket line" (Ngabo). His piece on the York University picket line, for example, described detailed stories of some of those affected by the strike, such as sociology PhD candidate Louise Birdsell Bauer's perspective on the "exorbitantly high rent in Toronto" to social work student Emily Irwin "braving the cold" because "the leaders are turning the university into a corporation" (Ngabo). Ngabo's article is just one example. Virtually every article written about the strike featured a photo, sometimes even a video, showing picketers standing in the cold together in solidarity (Brown, Chiose, Connor, Strapagiel). With the camera looking down at the crowds of picketers, photojournalists almost romanticized the strike as the noble plight of the underdogs, the common people set against the rich and powerful university (Brown "Both sides", Levinson King "Why this", Leslie). Even the union leader was only seen this way amid a crowd of picketers (Leslie). The faces and stories of the picketers gave a unified face and story to the event, one with which audiences could empathize. Even those readers far removed from the York University campus and unaware of the issues at the bargaining table could feel compassion for those seen huddling to stay warm in the snow and wind.

Every paragraph in the middle of your paper that makes a point should include:

An opening statement of the point about to be made

Cited evidence to support that point

A shift to analysis, to what that evidence MEANS in relation to your thesis

A closing sentence that summarizes the point and its impact, again in relation to your thesis.

Checking paragraph development

There's no one right length for a paragraph, and your paragraphs don't have to be identical in length. But very short paragraphs usually indicate a lack of development. Very long ones indicate other problems: perhaps more than one topic is discussed, and the paragraph needs breaking up; or perhaps you've digressed from your main point.

A simple, quick strategy for checking balance in your paragraphs is to reduce the view so that you see only the outlines of the paragraphs, like so: