THE “SIMPLE-TO-COMPLEX” ORDERING SCHEME

The ultimate goal of a college writing curriculum is for students to be able to write extended arguments that sophisticated readers would find clear and compelling. Formulating such arguments involves gathering relevant evidence, analyzing that evidence thoroughly, and drawing well-reasoned conclusions from that analysis. Generally speaking, the organizational approach best suited to writing such arguments is the “simple-to-complex approach.” This handout reviews the four organizational approaches described in the textbook for ENGL 1123 (Composition I) and expands upon the key difference between the emphatic approach and the simple-to-complex approach (the two approaches that are appropriate for thesis-driven papers).

ORGANIZATIONAL APPROACHES
(ADAPTED FROM THE ENGL 1123 TEXTBOOK)

CHRONOLOGICAL APPROACH
When writers use the chronological approach, they organize material according to a time sequence as if they are telling a story. The chronological approach is good for describing events and processes but, when used by itself, is not appropriate for formulating an argument. In other words, the chronological approach is better suited to expository analysis (description) than to critical analysis (argument). Many good arguments include chronological sequences, but a writer must do more than simply describe or narrate events in order to formulate a strong critical argument.

* The distinction between expository and critical analysis is fully explained in “Analytical Writing” (1123 website) and reviewed in “Academic Writing” (1133 website).

SPATIAL APPROACH
When writers use the spatial approach, they organize material in a way that corresponds to the particular spatial arrangement of an object (think, for instance, of an account of the various rooms of a house as one moves from the front of the house to the back). The spatial approach is good for describing various types of objects. For instance, a relatively simple spatial essay might describe the different components of a bicycle as they relate to each other. A more complex spatial essay might describe the various components of the Peruvian national government and how they relate to each other. Like the chronological approach, the spatial approach by itself is well suited for expository analysis (description) but not for critical analysis (argument). Many good arguments include spatial descriptions of complex objects, but a writer must do more that simply describe objects in order to formulate a compelling argument.

EMPHATIC APPROACH
When writers use the emphatic approach, they organize evidence in support of an argument based on the relative strength of the various pieces of evidence. This usually means saving the strongest evidence for last, but some writers take the opposite approach and present...
their strongest evidence first. Still other writers prefer to lead with their second best piece of evidence and then save their strongest evidence for last. In each of these cases, however, the writer arranges evidence according to how powerfully it supports the thesis.

Students are generally familiar with the emphatic approach (sometimes called five-paragraph form) because it offers a relatively simple, easy-to-use formula for organizing a paper: 1) Write an introductory paragraph that describes a problem and concludes with a claim (i.e., thesis statement) in response to that problem. 2) Write three body paragraphs (or four body paragraphs, or five, or so on), each presenting a piece of evidence that proves the claim. 3) Write a concluding paragraph that restates the claim and reminds the reader of how the claim has been supported. Below is a basic outline of a paper using the emphatic approach.

I. Thesis Statement: Despite improvement over the last century, racial discrimination is still a major problem within American society.

II. Body Paragraph #1: Racial and ethnic minorities have lower average incomes than white Americans, which indicates that racial discrimination is still a problem within American society.

III. Body Paragraph #2: Public schools that serve minority populations tend to receive less funding than public schools that serve predominately white students, which indicates that racial discrimination is still a problem within American society.

IV. Body Paragraph #3: Nonviolent crimes are more likely to be prosecuted when the offender is a minority, which indicates that racial discrimination is still a problem within American society.

V. Conclusion: Disparities in income, school funding, and incarceration rates prove that racial discrimination is still a problem in American society.

Useful as the emphatic approach is, however, the redundancy in the outline above should clue us in to the fact that it has its limits as a strategy for organizing an argument. Here are the three main problems with the emphatic approach:

1. It is structurally redundant. This means that each body paragraph does the same thing: it presents a piece of evidence and shows how that evidence reinforces the thesis. Notice that each piece of evidence in the example above “indicates that racism is still a problem within American society.” This can become tiresome and predictable to sophisticated readers who expect you to perform more diverse and complex tasks within your paper.

One indicator that the emphatic approach produces a weak organizational structure is that the body paragraphs are virtually interchangeable. If, for instance, we decided that a disparity in school funding is stronger evidence of racial discrimination than a disparity in the prosecution of nonviolent crimes, we could flip-flop body paragraph #2 and body paragraph #3 and it would not disrupt the overall logic of the paper in any significant way. In other words, the paragraphs do not build upon each other so that the reader must proceed through points A and B in order to understand point C. This means that the argument is static (unchanging) throughout the paper and is a strong indication that we are not building the type of complex argument that our sophisticated readers expect.
2. **It is conceptually limited.** The emphatic approach encourages us to section off each piece of evidence in order to demonstrate how it, considered independently, proves the thesis. Consequently, this approach discourages us from exploring the complex relationships between various pieces of evidence. In the sample outline above, for instance, consider the fact that the lower incomes referenced in paragraph #1 often have more to do with the racial gap in educational achievement, referenced in paragraph #2, than with acts of direct discrimination by employers. Also consider that the education gap is perpetuated by a system in which public schools are funded largely through property tax revenues within their districts (meaning that schools in low-income areas receive less funding per student than schools in higher-income areas), creating a vicious cycle in which racial disparities in income and education constantly reinforce each another.

When we consider this complex relationship between income and education, we begin to see that neither the racial disparity in income nor the racial disparity in education stem from direct acts of racial discrimination (i.e., white educators and employers favoring white students/employees over minority students/employees); taken together, however, they indicate a complex institutional arrangement that constantly reproduces racial disparities in income and education. Because this racist institutional structure cannot be understood by examining a single piece of it in isolation, however, an argument proving its existence would require an organizational approach that is more flexible and complex than the emphatic approach. In the sample outline above, each piece of evidence independently generates the thesis that “racial discrimination is still a problem within American society,” but an argument proving institutional racism would need to be proven over the course of a whole paper rather than within each individual body paragraph.

3. **It produces one-sided arguments.** This is perhaps the greatest shortcoming of the emphatic approach. It encourages us to seek out evidence that directly supports our thesis statement, which we should of course do, but it provides no framework for analyzing evidence that contradicts (or seems to contradict) our thesis. In other words, it discourages us from acknowledging and exploring the limits and shortcomings of our own preconceptions about the topic. When we fail to engage with contradictory evidence, our arguments tend to be too vague and too far-reaching (meaning that we claim more than we can really support). A sophisticated reader will recognize this and begin to question our credibility.

In the discussion of institutional racism, for example, it might be objected that predominately white rural communities are also at a disadvantage within a system that links education to income. This would seem to indicate that the current system is not strictly racist even if it does disproportionately affect minorities. If we are operating in the emphatic mode, we would be tempted to just ignore this inconvenient fact; if each body paragraph must prove the thesis, then we simply have no place to explore the implications of evidence that contradicts or complicates our thesis. The more responsible thing to do, however, would be to use this conflicting evidence to clarify what we mean by institutional racism. We might, for instance, clarify that by “institutional racism” we do not mean a system deliberately designed to target minorities but instead one that, for whatever reason, happens to work to the disadvantage of minority groups in a disproportionate way. But where would we do this in an essay organized according to the emphatic model?
**SIMPLE-TO-COMPLEX APPROACH**

In order to get beyond the limitations of the emphatic approach, experienced writers generally employ the simple-to-complex approach in formulating arguments. With this approach, writers begin with information and ideas that are relatively easy for the reader to process and gradually introduce more complex arguments. These more complex arguments are generated in two ways:

1. By exploring the relationships between various pieces of relevant evidence. Once we stop thinking about bits of evidence as each independently proving the thesis statement, we can begin to think about the relationships between various pieces of evidence in ways that generate more complex arguments. This is demonstrated above in the example regarding institutional racism. It is only when we explore the complex relationship between income and education that we begin to see a type of racism that is built into institutional structures rather than manifested in individual acts of discrimination.

2. By exploring evidence and arguments that contradict or seem to contradict our argument. When we examine contradictory evidence and arguments, we are able to formulate concessions and clarifications that make our own arguments more specific and more accurate. In a paper on institutional racism, for instance, we might begin with the relatively simple argument that racial disparities in income indicate that racial discrimination is still a problem within American society; but once we concede that disparities in income do not seem to be caused by deliberate or overt acts of discrimination by employers, we must begin to look for deeper, more complex causes.

Within the simple-to-complex model, the body paragraphs build off of each other to develop a complex argument that is indicated in the thesis statement but only takes full shape as the reader works through the various connections and concessions that the paper explores. In other words, to understand point C, the reader will have to work her way through points A and B. By the time the reader reaches the conclusion, the argument will have evolved into something far more specific and complex than the claim put forth in the thesis statement, though this argument should of course remain true to the basic idea of the thesis statement. This is the type of complexity that sophisticated readers expect, not because they value complexity for its own sake but because they recognize that serious issues require responses that move beyond easy assumptions and one-sided arguments.

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**RHETORICAL MODES & PARAGRAPH DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE SIMPLE-TO-COMPLEX APPROACH**

Because the simple-to-complex approach does away with the structural redundancy of the emphatic approach, it allows (and even requires) you to perform a wider variety of tasks within your body paragraphs as you build your argument over the course of the paper. Consider again the example of a paper on institutional racism, and in particular a paragraph that takes up the conflicting evidence regarding rural communities that are predominately white. As mentioned above, this paragraph would not simply present a piece of evidence and demonstrate how it proves the thesis (as required within the emphatic model) but would instead help us formulate a more specific and accurate definition of institutional racism. Such a paragraph would fit somewhere within a paper that gradually identifies and explains the nature and effects of institutional racism, but it would have no place in a paper that
attempts to prove over and over again (using different bits of evidence) that institutional racism exists.

**Rhetorical Modes**

Coincidentally, *definition* is one of the “rhetorical modes” or “patterns of development” identified within the textbook for Composition I (pp. 19-20, 35-36) and reviewed in the textbook for Composition II (p. 4). The other rhetorical modes identified in the Composition I textbook are: description, narration, illustration, division/classification, process analysis, comparison/contrast, cause/effect, and definition. Unfortunately, not all of these modes are reviewed in the Composition II textbook, but each may be employed as the central task of a body paragraph within a simple-to-complex essay. In order to improve upon the review provided in the Composition II textbook, then, the bulleted list below describes different types of rhetorical tasks that might be performed within a paper on institutional racism. Keep in mind, however, that these tasks are ordered according to the list provided in the Composition I textbook, not as they might actually appear in well-structured paper. Furthermore, any one of these modes might appear multiple times or not at all in any given paper. (For an outline of an actual simple-to-complex paper, see the sample outline provided at the end of this document.)

4. **Description** – Describe conditions in a typical inner-city school. Such a description might be used to suggest that not enough is being done to address the educational needs of most minority students.

5. **Narration** – Narrate the history of “white flight,” which has led to *de facto* segregation (a situation in which inner-city schools are populated primarily by racial minorities while suburban schools are populated primarily by white students). Such a narrative might be used to demonstrate that institutional racism generally cannot be traced back to any distinct or clearly racist origin; as with *de facto* segregation, institutional racism is almost always the product of a complex history of small decisions, some deliberately racist and some not.

6. **Illustration** – Provide an example that illustrates how some communities are successfully battling the effects of institutional racism. Such an example might be used to argue that, while it may be impossible to eradicate all discrimination from our institutions, positive steps can be taken to establish more equality of opportunity.

7. **Division/Classification** – Clearly distinguish overt discrimination from institutional racism. This distinction can be used to explain why institutional racism requires more subtle and complex solutions. Overt discrimination can be identified in specific actions taken by specific people, so it can and should be directly punished. Institutional racism, however, is indirect and often implemented by people who have no idea that they are part of a discriminatory system.

8. **Process Analysis** – Describe the process by which public schools are funded. Such a description would go a long way toward explaining what institutional racism is and how it works. As mentioned above, the fact that most public schools receive about half their funding through local property tax revenues means that schools in wealthy districts are funded at much higher rates than schools in poorer districts. This means that students in low-income districts, where racial minorities are disproportionately represented, are denied the same educational opportunities as students in more wealthy districts.
9. **Comparison/Contrast** – Contrast public responses to evidence of overt discrimination with public responses to evidence of institutional racism. While overt discrimination is almost always unanimously condemned, evidence of institutional racism is usually ignored or rejected by the public at large. This pattern of public attitudes might be used to explain why it is so difficult to find workable solutions to institutional racism.

10. **Cause/Effect** – Explain that people often reject the idea of institutional racism because it tends to implicate them in discriminatory systems. Most people do not consider themselves racist, so they are offended at the suggestion that they unknowingly participate in or benefit from racist systems. Such an explanation of the cause of public indifference might be used to explain why it is so difficult to gain widespread support for efforts to combat institutional racism.

11. **Definition** – Clarify what is meant by “institutional racism.” As mentioned above, the circumstances that link income to educational opportunity do not only affect minority communities. For this reason, it might be necessary to clarify that the term “institutional racism” does not indicate that a system that is deliberately designed to target racial minorities. Instead, it describes a system that, on the whole (and regardless of anyone’s intentions), tends to provide more restricted opportunities for racial minorities.

**Paragraph Development**

In order to be considered well-developed, a body paragraph employing any one of these rhetorical modes must contain two things:

1. **Adequate Evidence.** Whether you are providing an instructive narrative, formulating a key definition, or drawing an important comparison, you must provide evidence that adequately supports your rhetorical task. If, for instance, you find it necessary to describe conditions at a typical inner-city school, it would not be appropriate to simply invent a description off the top of your head. Instead, you would need to incorporate details from one or more actual inner-city schools, perhaps by referencing a newspaper or magazine article that includes such details. Similarly, if you are describing the process by which public schools are funded, you would need to provide concrete details of how schools are funded within a particular state rather than make vague, unsupported generalizations about how schools are funded.

2. **Critical Commentary.** Any well-developed body paragraph includes critical commentary that clearly links its rhetorical task back to the thesis. If you refer back to the distinction between expository and critical analysis (outlined in “Analytical Writing” and reviewed “Academic Writing”) you will notice that several of the rhetorical modes listed above describe expository tasks (like describing, narrating, or illustrating) while others describe critical tasks (like defining, comparing and contrasting, or explaining causes and effects). Whether the central task of the paragraph is expository or critical, however, it should include some kind of critical commentary (i.e., an argument) that advances the thesis in a clear and compelling way.

Imagine that you are writing a paper with the following thesis: “While overt discrimination is no longer tolerated in American society, there are still subtle forms of racism that can and should be addressed.” Through the course of several paragraphs you have established that by “more subtle forms of racism” you mean institutional racism, you have explained exactly what institutional racism is, and you have demonstrated that the achievement gap between
white students and minority students has resulted from institutional racism within the public school system. Your next task is to *illustrate* how one or more major American cities are attempting to narrow the achievement gap within their schools, and you have settled upon Boston as one of your chief examples. If you write a paragraph that stays entirely within the expository mode and simply describes the recent steps that the Boston public school system has taken, your reader will see the thematic connection of the paragraph to the rest of your paper but may not understand exactly how you intend the Boston example to advance your argument. One reader might interpret the Boston approach as a positive model for other cities to emulate, while another reader might interpret it as a misguided approach to addressing institutional racism. It is up to you, then, to put forth a compelling argument for how the Boston example should be interpreted. This is the function of good critical commentary.

Below is an example of a well-developed body paragraph in the illustration mode. The paragraph is taken from the book, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man*, by literary scholar John F. Kasson. The chapter in which the paragraph appears argues that Americans in the early Twentieth Century worried that, amidst all the comforts and luxuries of modern life, they were losing the primitive vitality that had allowed earlier generations to conquer the New World, fight for independence, and craft a bold new nation. The paragraph presented here describes an experiment performed by a man named Joseph Knowles, but notice how the final sentence of the paragraph offers an interpretation of Knowles’ experiment that links the paragraph to the broader argument of the chapter.

**Sample Paragraph:** Perhaps the American figure who most grandiosely struck the primitivist pose in this period was a minor Boston illustrator, Joseph Knowles. Beginning in early August 1913, Knowles conducted an “experiment” that both reversed the passage from wilderness to modern technological civilization and, more than any contemporary effort, paralleled Edgar Rice Burroughs’s literary experiment in *Tarzan of the Apes*. The experiment that Knowles proposed was to test whether a modern man, stripped naked and without any implements, could enter the woods and live the primitive life successfully, depending solely upon his own individual resources. The wilderness he chose was not in Equatorial Africa but in darkest Maine, and he was not a noble foundling, like Tarzan, but an experienced woodsman and guide on the eve of his forty-fourth birthday. Even so, the rather pudgy, cigarette-smoking Knowles made an unlikely exemplar of savage virility. The surprising celebrity he achieved testifies to how much a public adapting to modern technological civilization craved the assurance that the urban white man could face the elements on his own and triumph.

Notice that the bulk of this paragraph is written in the expository mode, describing Knowles’ experiment. The last two sentences, however, reflect on Knowles’ experiment in a way that clearly advances the larger argument of the book chapter. The fact that the “pudgy, cigarette-smoking Knowles” could garner so much public attention as an “exemplar of savage virility” tells us something about the broader American public of the time period. Knowles’ fame, Kasson argues, is a sign that these Americans “craved the assurance” that even the most pampered among them could, in a time of need, recover the primitive vitality that they seemed to have lost.
SIMPLE-TO-COMPLEX ORGANIZATION (SAMPLE OUTLINE)

Below is a detailed plan for a position paper that will employ the simple-to-complex approach (the completed paper is available on both the 1123 and 1133 websites). For each paragraph, the outline identifies the rhetorical task that will be performed and explains how that task will be used to advance the argument of the paper. Notice that as the paper moves from the thesis statement to the conclusion, the argument becomes increasingly specific (and therefore increasingly complex).

**Title:** “Promoting Police Diversity Through a Community-Building Emphasis”

I. **Introduction (Narration):** Briefly present the history of integrated police forces and the use of quota systems for promoting minority officers.

   **Thesis Statement:** In order to achieve racial equality within today’s police forces, police departments need to go beyond mere quotas and adopt promotion policies that reward the unique contributions of minority officers.

II. **Body Paragraph #1 (Illustration):** Use the example of an undercover Harlem cop to demonstrate that minority officers experience deep conflicts between their roles as police officers and their ties to minority communities. Use this example to argue that promotion quotas do not address the deep differences in how white officers and minority officers experience their jobs.

III. **Body Paragraph #2 (Compare/Contrast):** Reference scholarly source regarding conflict resolution strategies to show the contrast in how black and white police officers approach their duties. Use this contrast to suggest that minority officers tend to be more engaged in community-building efforts than white officers.

IV. **Body Paragraph #3 (Cause/Effect):** Argue that community-building efforts tend to result in better public safety, partly because they help to develop better relationships between communities and police forces.

V. **Body Paragraph #4 (Cause/Effect):** Argue that police departments should consider community-building activities within their promotion processes because doing so would ease racial tensions within departments more effectively than simple quota systems. Rather than rewarding minority officers who behave more like their white peers, such a policy would recognize and reward the unique contributions of minority officers to law enforcement goals.

VI. **Conclusion (Compare/Contrast):** Clarify the different goals of a quota system and a promotion policy with a community-building emphasis (the former is intended to create diversity while the latter is intended to decrease the racial tensions that often accompany diversity). Based on this contrast, concede that quota systems are still necessary and should not simply be replaced by a community-building emphasis in promotions. Argue that the two strategies are most effective when used together.