

# Organizing a Paper

010715

Here are some guidelines on organizing a paper. Suppose the paper is about a movie called *Matchsticks*. And suppose the assignment directive has these two questions:

1. Identify two or three specific priorities that Lucas tried to balance in his life. Give evidence for each.
2. In light of the lecture material on fiction, in what sense is this fictional story "true" about your life? Give examples from both your life and the movie.

Length: Between 400 and 500 words.

## So how to begin?

First, use the assigned directives to *organize* what you will treat in your paper. This part is quite easy but very important because it ensures that you will deal with every part of the assignment. It also helps you focus on what is assigned and avoid running off on tangents.

Here might be your planning sheet:

Lucas' priorities

Priorities Lucas was balancing = \_\_\_\_\_

Evidence for each = \_\_\_\_\_

"Truth"

The lecture material on "truth" in fiction = \_\_\_\_\_

The "truth" in Lucas' life = \_\_\_\_\_

Similar "truth" in my life = \_\_\_\_\_

## Then what?

Then reflect on what you will include in each part (following the "=" sign.) Here is where you study, reflect, and work out your ideas.

It is particularly important to "engage" the resources provided in the course. Your teacher is not interested in your free-floating thoughts but in how well your thinking connects course materials to the assigned topic. Consider any insights that came from (a) the reading material, (b) the

discussion, (c) sources outside the course. Make notes on these insights, along with proper citations about their source.

### **What next?**

Then start writing. For each of the two sections of the assigned questions, prepare:

An introduction that introduces the question

Your answers to the question, supported by evidence.

A brief conclusion.

### **An example**

Here's how you might end up writing your paper:

#### **Question 1**

Your opening sentence should get right to what is assigned. One approach is to summarize what you found:

"In *Matchsticks*, Lucas showed that his first priority was his oldest son Joey, followed by his acting career, and followed then by his wife, Sarah."

Notice that in this kind of introduction you are giving the end result of your reflections, not how you went about reaching these results. Also, notice that you are knowingly excluding other priorities such as his bird-watching hobby and his worries about financial security. In other words, an opening, summary sentence is often the *last* thing you write because the effort to organize your thoughts gives you insights that you didn't have when you started.

Then spend one paragraph on each of the three priorities you selected, giving the evidence from the movie. Discuss the difficulty of balancing one against the others. Cite any insights from other sources.

Close with a comment on *how* he balanced these priorities. For example:

"As it turned out, in the crisis of losing his job, Lucas surprised himself that his acting career came second to his love for his son, Joey. At the same time, he also learned that his love for Sarah had been cooling for some time."

Notice that this comment requires both your reflection and your commitment to an enlightened opinion.

## **Question 2**

Here, again, your opening sentence should be a direct response to the assignment. Another approach, instead of summarizing your findings, is to summarize what you intend to explain:

“According to the lecture, fiction is ‘true’ when it reveals the possibilities of the human heart. Lucas gradually learned what the possibilities of his heart were as he faced the loss of his job. I too have learned the possibilities of my heart by facing certain crises. Like Lucas, this learning came gradually.”

Notice again that you have given some thought to this, particularly how the “truth” of one’s heart comes gradually as a person meets one crisis after another. Of course, you started thinking before you started writing, but the effort to write very often advances your thinking—sometimes in surprising ways.

Then give an account of the crises Lucas faced and what he learned about his heart’s possibilities—both its weakness and its strengths.

Then give an account of similar issues in your life.

Finally, close with a brief summary comment on how Lucas’ struggle is “true” in your own life.

## **A Weaker Opening**

Another common opening is to list what you will cover:

In this paper I will first cover what Luke's priorities are. Then I will discuss how the fictional story is "true" about my own life."

The difference between this opening and the summarize findings and summarize intentions approaches is this one contains nothing that would make your teacher curious. He or she already knows what the paper should cover. A teacher assigns papers to learn something, namely, how well you understand and apply the ideas presented in a lecture or assigned reading. To test the effectiveness of your opening sentences, ask yourself: Will they ignite the teacher's interest or will they convey an expectation of slogging through muck?

## *Test your paper vs the assignment.*

You are almost finished. But now it's important to make sure you've done everything you were assigned and nothing more.

### **Check the length**

For example, make sure the paper falls within the length restriction. Why are teachers so fussy about length?

First, word limits **level the playing field** by making it easier for teachers to be fair in grading.

Second, maximum word limits **force you to organize** your ideas under larger topics or concepts, rather than just list them in a disconnected way.

### **Pitch the Pears**

If a farmer asks the farmhands to **pick apples** all day, and they bring back **both pears and apples**, the farmer now has a problem of what to do with the pears. Sure, their pears are pretty, but not to the farmer.



Teachers too find it difficult to assess papers full of pears, when only apples were assigned. For example, did the teacher ask you about how you decided to write this paper? Were you asked to talk about your difficulties in writing it? Are your views on screenwriting relevant to the assignment? If not, then get rid of them. Pitch the pears.