



Holding It Together

Organization takes much more than putting details into a neat, orderly list. It is a way of holding little ideas together so they form something bigger, such as an essay, story, poem, argument, and so on. Think of it this way: Suppose we use bricks to represent individual details. We can organize those bricks by stacking them to make a wall, but that wall won't be very strong without some mortar to hold the bricks in place. Three organizational features make a writer's wall of ideas particularly strong—the lead, the conclusion, and transitions that connect ideas. In this lesson, we'll look at them one by one, and then see how they work together.

Sharing Favorite Leads

A good lead is especially important because it kicks off any piece of writing. It's the first thing the reader sees or hears. Meet with your writing circle to share some favorite leads. Then, together, write down three qualities of a good lead.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



Choosing the Lead that Works

How many leads do you usually write for one piece? Would it surprise you to hear that professional writers often write a dozen or more? Following is one lead from a professional writer, Ji-Li Jiang, author of *Red Scarf Girl*. We grouped it with two others that we wrote. See if you can tell which one of the three is Jiang's lead. Put a check by it.

- I remembered coming home from kindergarten and showing Grandma the songs and dances we had learned. Grandma sat before us with her knitting, nodding her head in time to the music.
- I have wonderful memories of my grandma. She was a small, very friendly person, who made friends easily. She loved music and knitting.
- My grandma was a really special person. She always had time for us, even when she was busy with her household chores, such as knitting.

Exploring Transitions

Transitions are words and phrases that link ideas, thoughts, and, sometimes, whole paragraphs together. You no doubt use them all the time, but you may or may not refer to them as *transitions*. Some people call them linking words or word bridges.

Meet with your writing partner or writing circle. Working together, create a list of transitional words and phrases organized by purpose. We have given you a few words or phrases for each category. See if you can add one or two more.





Transition Words

- Words to show **time**: *while, meanwhile, next week, afterward, then, suddenly*

Other words we thought of: _____

- Words to set up a **comparison**: *likewise, also*

Other words we thought of: _____

- Words to set up a **contrast**: *although, but, nevertheless*

Other words we thought of: _____

- Words to create **emphasis**: *especially, for this reason*

Other words we thought of: _____

- Words to **wrap things up**: *in conclusion, finally, anyway, in the end*

Other words we thought of: _____

- Words to **add information** or **set up an example**: *for instance, also, and*

Other words we thought of: _____

Sharing an Example: *Red Scarf Girl*

Let's put these first two organizational pieces together with an example passage from author Ji-Li Jiang's memoir, *Red Scarf Girl*. In this book, Jiang tells about growing up in China during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. Her family, shunned by neighbors and former friends, lived in constant fear of harassment or arrest. In your writing circles, read the following passage describing Ji-Li's grandmother, who came to live with them to escape trouble. Follow these steps:

1. Notice the lead. Did you choose it from the previous list of three?
2. Using your transition list as a reference, highlight any transition words or phrases you find in the passage.



I remembered coming home from kindergarten and showing Grandma the songs and dances we had learned. Grandma sat before us with her knitting, nodding her head in time to the music. Sometimes we insisted that she sing with us, and she would join in with an unsteady pitch and heavy Tianjin accent, wagging her head and moving her arms just as we did.

When we tired of singing, we would pester Grandma to show us her feet. When she was young it was the custom to tightly bind girls' feet in bandages to make them as small as possible—sometimes as small as three inches long. This was considered the height of a woman's beauty. Grandma's feet were half bound, and when she was only seven she fought to have them released. As a result her feet were smaller than natural feet but larger than bound ones. We loved to touch them and play with them. If she refused to let us, we would tickle her until she panted with laughter.

Red Scarf Girl
by Ji-Li Jiang

Share and Reflect

Share the transitions you found with the rest of the class. What did you notice about this author's use of transitions?

- She used so many it was actually confusing and overwhelming to me.
- She used so few I had a hard time connecting ideas.
- Her use of transitions was very balanced—just enough to create a smooth flow of ideas.

The Finishing Touch

This passage from Ji-Li Jiang actually has a conclusion, but we left it out to give you a little challenge. With your partner or writing circle, complete the following steps.



1. Read the passage aloud, one more time.
2. Talk about ways the writer might wrap up this passage (not the whole book—just this part).
3. Draft your own conclusion, about two to four sentences.

Putting All the Pieces Together

It's time for you to put the pieces together in your own writing. There's a lot to think about with good organization, but you can do it. Begin by listing the important organizational features you remember from this and past lessons.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

My Topic

Now choose a topic for a paragraph or two—something that's on your mind right now or an idea from our list.

★ My own idea: _____

- An early memory
- Country music vs. Rock or Hip-hop
- Consequences of rude behavior
- What you'd see from my rooftop



Write for 15 minutes or more. In your mind, imagine the reader saying, “What’s your big idea?”

Share and Compare

Meet with a partner or your writing circle and take turns sharing your drafts aloud. Listen for the following strong organizational features.

- A clear central message that makes it easier to organize
- A design that’s easy to follow
- A strong lead
- Good transitions to connect ideas
- An effective conclusion to wrap things up

Pick one example to share with the whole class.



A Writer’s Question

Organization seems to have so many parts. How can a writer possibly remember to include them all?



Putting It to the Test

Organizationally, what’s the biggest mistake a writer can make in an on-demand writing situation?