YOU MAY WANT TO TAKE A LOOK AT ORGANIZATION…

- When you’re writing to sort out your ideas and there’s a lot going on in your draft
- When you’ve been immersed in your draft for a long time and are losing perspective
- If you’re very detail-oriented and have a hard time seeing the big picture
- When you need to balance aspects of your draft (for example, summary vs. analysis, or amount of space spent on various authors, time periods, kinds of data, etc.)
- When you know your draft needs to be cut down, but you’re not sure which parts to remove or shorten
- When you think you need to include some new material, but you aren’t sure where it fits
- When readers tell you they are having a hard time following your argument
- When you need to re-sort your material (for example, you have something in chapter 5 right now, but your advisor wants you to move it to chapter 1)
- Pretty much any time!

TELLING A STORY

- Imagine that you are teaching your material to students or that you are giving a conference presentation to people unfamiliar with your specific area of research. What would they need to know first? What next?
- Try actually telling a friend or family member about your research; see where you start, what you include, and in what order you present ideas. Record this conversation, or have someone make notes while you talk.
- Read your draft out loud, or have a friend or your computer read it to you (see the Writing Center’s handout “Reading Aloud”). Does your draft make sense when you hear it (not just look at it)?

REVERSE OUTLINING

- Often we make outlines to plan organization before we write—but a reverse outline, created after you write a draft, helps you see what organization you actually created
- You can make a reverse outline at several levels: the paragraph level, the section level, the chapter level, the whole-dissertation level…you may want to experiment with several of these
- Look at the text you want to reorganize. Identify “chunks”—groups of related ideas that are clustered together. It may be that each paragraph is a chunk, but if you often have sprawling or disunified paragraphs, a single paragraph may contain more than one chunk.
- Next to each chunk, jot a few words that summarize it. You can do this on a printed copy of the draft. Or you can jot your notes on a separate sheet of paper—you’ll ultimately want to have the notes on their own page, regardless of how you start out. These very short notes are just for you; they don’t need to be worded so that anyone else could understand them.
- Here’s an example of a typical length for the notes: Singer’s moral theory, Jason example, Singer moral standing, Cohen ms, Cohen on experimentation, obj. 1 to Cohen, horse example, obj. 2.
- Now you’ve got a sense of the “big picture” of your draft. Take a look at the outline you’ve made.
- Ask yourself whatever you’re interested in:
  - Are my points in a logical order?
  - Why did I arrange things this way?
  - Did I repeat myself?
  - Did I leave anything out?
  - Are all of these parts really relevant? Do they belong in here?
  - Do I need to spend more (or less) time on anything?
  - Am I bringing up topics, moving to other things, then returning to those topics? Is that intentional?
  - Do readers get the information in the order they would need it?
COLOR CODING

- Color coding is a handy supplement or alternative to reverse outlining. It is a fun way to interact with your draft (a great thing to do if you are burned out on a particular day), and it gives you a sense of the draft’s overall structure.
- Get some colored pencils or highlighters and print your draft (you can do something like this with an electronic version of your paper using the highlight feature of your word processor, but it’s more of a pain).
- Ask yourself what you are looking for. Maybe you want to check summary vs. analysis, so you make summary blue and analysis red. Or maybe you want to talk about various authors, so you make author #1 green, author #2 orange, author #3 purple, miscellaneous other authors red, and your own thoughts blue.
- If you are using a lot of colors, you may want to make a key at the top of your paper or on a separate piece of paper so you don’t forget what each represents.
- Go through and start marking each sentence (highlighting, underlining, or circling) with the appropriate color. You could look for all the blue sentences at once, then go back and do all the red ones, etc., or you could just go through the sentences in order, one at a time.
- Now take a step back and look at how the colors are distributed. Is your draft organized the way you wanted it to be?

USING INDEX CARDS OR SOMETHING SIMILAR

- Many writers like to jot their main ideas, bits of evidence, quotes, etc. on index cards, which can then be laid out on a table or the floor and arranged in various orders.
- Rearranging your index cards helps you think about the choices you are making (and could make) about your organization; it lets you think through different possible versions of your draft.
- If you decide that a certain point isn’t relevant, it’s easy to just remove that card from your pile—and save it for later, if you want to, in case you think you might change your mind or use it elsewhere.
- Once you’ve sorted your index cards, it’s time to rearrange the corresponding bits of your draft.

FINAL THOUGHTS

- After reorganizing your text, you will need to work on your thesis/introduction and your transitions to make sure the pieces fit smoothly together.
- Working on organization often makes you aware of places where you can strengthen your argument or raises substantive questions you need to answer.
- A well-organized draft is easier to read—your audience will appreciate the work you have put into refining your organization.