

Organization of Information

(Source: Eisenberg, Anne. (1992). *Guide to Technical Editing: Discussion, Dictionary, and Exercises*. New York: Oxford University Press.)

State the idea before its explanation

Make the path of the argument clear by summing up main points before introducing detail. This will provide a framework for the reader.

Example

Problem

Writer gives detail without first providing a framework for the detail.

Solution

Writer adds a lead or opening paragraph that summarizes the main points of the pass that follows.

Many foods contain substances that may influence cancer formation in humans. Evidence that diet is one factor in cancer comes from two entirely different kinds of data: laboratory analyses and population studies.

Laboratory analyses indicate that natural carcinogens are found in a number of foods, including potatoes, parsley, and celery. Processing may add potential carcinogens to other foods. For example, the nitrates that are used to preserve meats such as bacon can combine with amines in the body to form nitrosamines, which are known carcinogens. Charcoal broiling of meat causes the formation of carcinogens called polycyclic hydrocarbons.

Population studies comparing the incidence of specific cancers in populations with different dietary patterns also have yielded valuable information. For example, the Japanese diet contains much less fat than the American diet, and the Japanese have a much lower incidence of breast cancer and colon cancer than Americans. This kind of evidence is suggestive but not conclusive. It is possible that some other element of the diet that is closely associated with fat is the causative agent, or that the overall diet, rather than individual nutrients, is responsible for the increased cancer risk.

In longer documents, try statements of main ideas and significance at the top of the document, at the top of complicated sections, and before any complicated paragraph or series of paragraphs.

Try a combination of prefatory sentences that (1) summarize main points, (2) show division of the argument, and (3) show the significance of the details that follows. This method reinforces the framework for the reader.

Example (portions in bold reflect solutions to organizational problems.)

Problems

Reader must scan entire section (3 pages) to realize that the discussion comprises four specific demographic changes.

Solution: Writer adds summary of four main parts and their significance.

Solution: Writer adds subhead, Fertility rates, and inserts statement summarizing main point of details on fertility.

It is not readily apparent that the writer has begun discussing the first division, fertility rates. Also, the main point of this subsection on fertility is not stated at onset.

It is not readily apparent that the writer has begun discussing second subsection, "Aging of the population."

Solution: Writer adds second subhead

Demographic Background

Major demographic and sociological changes directly influencing family composition have taken place in this century, with the pace of change accelerating in the past two decades. **Almost all developed countries have seen changes of four principal types: a decline in fertility rates, the aging of the population, an erosion of the institution of marriage, and a rapid increased in childbirths out of wedlock. Each of these four trends has played a part in the transformation of the modern family.**

Fertility Rates

Over the past century, women in industrialized countries have moved to having fewer children—that is, to lower fertility rates. This decline in fertility rates was, in many cases, interrupted by the post-World War II baby boom, but it resumed in the 1960s. Japan is an exception, in that fertility rates have declined sharply and almost continuously since the late 1940s, with no post-war upturn apart from a small recovery and stabilization from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s. The change in total fertility rates in 10 countries is shown in Table 1.

With the exception of some baby "boomlets" in the later 1970s and 1980s, total fertility rates in most developed countries have declined below the level needed to replace population deaths, namely, 2.1 children per woman. This statistic means that the current population will not even replace itself if current levels of fertility continue. By 1988, fertility rates in the developed countries fell into a narrow range from 1.3 to 1.4 children per woman in Germany and Italy to around 1.9 to 2.0 in the United States and Sweden.

Decreased fertility has important implications for the family, in particular, family size is getting smaller, with consequences for parents—especially mothers—and children. Probably the most significant effect of falling fertility is the opportunity it has afforded women for increased participation in the labor market. And the converse relation holds as well: increased participation leads to lower fertility. Smaller families also mean fewer relatives to care for young children.

Aging of the Population

It is important to consider the age structure of the population because different arrays of persons by age result in different household structures across countries. Mortality, as well as fertility, has declined in the 20th century. The decline in mortality has been more or less continuous, and the average age of death has risen considerably in all developed countries.

Like expectancy at birth is higher for women than for men in all the countries studied. Women outlived men by 6 to 7 years, on average, and this influences household structures, as many more women than men live alone at older ages. In most developed countries, women must anticipate a period of living alone at some point during their later years.

Organization of Information 2

Aging of the population is common to all the industrialized countries, although there are considerable differences in the extent and timing of the phenomenon. These differences are reflected in the comparisons presented later on household type. For example, countries with high proportions of elderly people tend to have higher proportions of single-person households, because the elderly are increasingly living alone.

This third division of argument not readily apparent.

Solution: Writer adds third subhead

Details of Table 3 given without prefatory statement summing up details.

Solution: Writer summarizes point in Table 3 that details will illustrate.

Fourth division in argument not readily apparent. No summary statement of details subsequently recounted in Table 4.

Solution: Writer add subhead and summary of details in Table 4

Marriage and Divorce

Almost everyone in the United States gets married at some time in his or her life. The United States has long had one of the highest marriage rates in the world, and even in recent years it has maintained a relatively high rate. For the cohort born in 1945, for example, 95 percent of the men have married, compared with 75 percent in Sweden. The other countries studied ranked somewhere between these two extremes.

According to Table 3, a trend toward fewer marriages is plain in all of the countries studied, although the timing of this decline differs from country to country. In Scandinavia and Germany, the downward trend in the marriage rate was already evident in the 1960s; in the United States, Canada, Japan, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, the decline began in the 1970s. (Table 3)

In Europe, the average age at marriage fell until the beginning of the 1970s, when a complete reversal occurred. Postponement of marriage by the young is now common throughout the continent. The generation born in the early 1950s initiated this new behavior, characterized by both later and less frequent marriage. Average age at first marriage has also been rising in the United States since the mid-1950s, but Americans still tend to marry earlier than their European counterparts.

Births Out of Wedlock

Rates of births to unmarried women have increased in all developed countries except Japan (see Table 4). Close to half of all live births in Sweden are now outside of wedlock, up from only 1 in 10 in 1960. Denmark is not far behind. In the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, unmarried women account for more than 1 out of 5 births, while the rates are far lower in the Netherlands, Italy, and Germany.

A relatively high proportion of births out of wedlock in the United States and the United Kingdom are to teenagers—more than 33 and 29 percent, respectively. In Sweden, teenagers account for only 6 percent, and in France and Japan about 10 percent. More than half of the births out of wedlock in Sweden are to women between the ages of 25 and 34, while only one-quarter to women in that age group in the United States and the United Kingdom.

All of the foregoing demographic trends have had an impact on household size and composition in the developed nations. This impact can be seen clearly in developments since 1960.

Focus Vague Language

Vague language can be interpreted in a variety of ways (e.g., "This is an interesting new method.") Be specific so the reader knows exactly what you are talking about.

Example

Problem: Sentence too general; doesn't address question of how or why method is interesting.

This is an interesting new method.

Solution: Writer provides opening sentences that summarize ensuing information.

The British Library has developed a new, low-cost method to preserve books. The method, which uses gamma rays to irradiate chemically treated paper, costs only \$8 per volume—a significant savings over the \$340 price tag for the present method.

Problem: Summary vague: says "results are presented and conclusion drawn," but does not tell actual results or conclusions.

Abstract: This paper discusses how buprenorphine suppresses cocaine self-administration by rhesus monkeys. Results are presented and conclusions drawn. Finally, implications are discussed in terms of the general problem of drug abuse.

Solution: Writer makes language more specific; gives actual results, conclusions, and implications.

Abstract: Daily administration of buprenorphine significantly suppressed cocaine self-administration by rhesus monkeys for 30 consecutive days. **The effects of buprenorphine were dose-dependent. These data suggest that buprenorphine would be a useful pharmacotherapy for treatment of cocaine abuse.**