

ttms

Be a Better Writer



Our *Writing Teacher's Strategy Guide* has been downloaded more than 250,000 times. But we wanted to create a book series, based on the same ideas, but written just for kids. So a few years ago, we wrote *Be a Better Writer*. And now we're getting ready to create the 2nd edition.

The current book covers the following topics:

- Topic Selection
- Pre-Writing
- Drafting
- Revising
- Editing
- Publishing
- Ideas
- Organization
- Voice
- Word Choice
- Sentence Fluency
- Conventions
- Memoirs
- Essays
- Editorials
- Book Reviews
- Fiction
- Research

What other topics would you like us to cover? And, within the existing list, what kinds of specific information that we could pass along to kids would be the most helpful to you in your teaching? Let us know by clicking on this link:

info@ttms.org

Finally, we've been thinking about producing a companion teacher's guide and a set of student workbooks to accompany each major topic. What do you think of this? Is it something that would be helpful to you?



Better Organization

By Steve Peha and Margot Lester

Ten things you should know even if you don't read this book:

1. Organization in writing refers to five things: beginnings, endings, sequencing, pacing, and transitions.
2. A good beginning has to get your readers' attention and make them want to read more.
3. The beginning is the most important part of your piece because if it isn't good, readers may not read the rest.
4. A good ending has to feel finished and give your readers something important to think about.
5. Endings are much harder to write than beginnings, but it's important to write them well because the last words your readers read are the words they are most likely to remember.
6. In narrative writing, there are many ways to order the things that happen. You don't always have to start at the beginning and stop at the end.
7. Deciding on the order of things in non-narrative writing can be harder than in narrative writing because you don't have a timeline to follow.
8. Pacing is related to importance. Writers can slow down the pace by adding more details when they get to an important part. They can quicken the pace by using fewer details in less important parts.
9. The best transition is no transition at all. Whenever possible, put the parts of your piece in a logical order that your readers can follow without transitional phrases.
10. Using headings as transitional elements is the easiest way to move from section to section in a piece.

Let's Get Organized

Anyone who knows me knows I'm incredibly disorganized. My desk is a mess. My office is in chaos. And I couldn't use a filing cabinet if my life depended on it. It's not that I'm opposed to organization, I just never think about it. I guess I'm too busy making a mess to worry about cleaning it up.

My writing used to be like that, too. I never thought about how I was going to organize my ideas in a piece. I just started writing at what seemed to be the beginning and tried to stop at the what seemed to be the end—not exactly an approach I could rely on to produce good results.

My problem was that I never had any language I could use to talk about organization with other writers or to think about it on my own. It wasn't until I hit my thirties, and had been writing professionally for over ten years, that I took some classes about teaching writing and got the help I needed.

One of the most important things I learned was that organization isn't as complicated as I once thought. In fact, it boils down to five essential things:

- **A beginning that catches your readers' attention and makes them want to read more.** Different kinds of beginnings affect readers in different ways. We want to think carefully about the kind of beginning we choose, so we can draw our readers into the story and keep them reading beyond the first few sentences.
- **An ending that feels finished and gives your readers something to think about.** Endings are hard because they have to satisfy expectations readers have built up through the entire piece. It's not enough just to stop when we're out of material. We have to leave the reader with something that not only wraps things up but also explains why what we've written matters.

- **A sequence that puts each part of a piece in the best order.** The order we put things in has a huge impact on our readers. Even true stories about things that happen in our lives can be sequenced in different ways. We don't always have to start at the beginning and end at the end.
- **Pacing that allows for the right amount of time for each part of a piece.** For some parts of a piece, we need to write many sentences; for others, just a few. This affects the pace of our writing. Pacing is partly related to detail. In general, the more details we use, the slower the pace; the fewer details we use, the quicker the pace. (Pacing can also be affected by the kinds of sentences a writer uses. But I'll be talking more about this in Chapter 7: Better Sentences.)
- **Transitions that make a piece easy to follow from part to part.** Pieces are made up of parts. Transitions help readers find their way from part to part without getting confused. Sometimes we actually write strings of words called "transitional phrases" to let the reader know a new part is beginning. But if you put each part in the right order, and use thoughtful details, the reader can move through your piece simply by following the logic of your ideas.

Beginnings, endings, sequencing, pacing, transitions. That's organization. Of course, when you're stuck somewhere in the middle of a draft, it's not that simple. Knowing what these things are doesn't make you a better writer; it's knowing what to do with them that counts. But don't worry—that's exactly what we'll be covering in the rest of this chapter.

Your Checklist for Better Organization

You can be a better writer by having better organization. Take a piece you've written and see if it has the following elements. If it doesn't, use this checklist as a guide for revising it.

A piece of writing with good organization has five essential elements:

- ✓ **A beginning that catches your readers' attention and makes them want to read more.** How does your beginning catch your readers' attention? Why would your readers want to read more? How will your readers know they are about to have a worthwhile experience?
- ✓ **An ending that feels finished and gives your readers something to think about.** How does your ending make the piece feel finished? What will it make your readers think about? How does it let your readers know that what they've read is important?
- ✓ **A sequence that puts each part of a piece in the best order.** Can your readers easily identify the different parts of your piece? Does each part follow logically from one to the next? How does the sequence keep your readers reading?
- ✓ **Pacing that allows for the right amount of time for each part of a piece.** Why do you spend more time in some parts than in others? Are there places where you move ahead too quickly or hang on too long? Do the more important parts of your piece have more details than the less important parts?

- ✓ **Transitions that make a piece easy to follow from part to part.** How do you move from part to part? How do these transitions help your readers follow the piece? Have you done everything you can to arrange parts in a logical order so transitional phrases are rarely needed?

Of these five elements, a strong beginning and a satisfying ending are probably the most important. Sequencing matters, too, of course, but often the sequence of a piece is suggested by the story you're telling or the ideas you're working with, so it may not require much thought. Pacing can be very subtle; it may not matter at all if the pieces you are writing are very short. Transitional phrases will often come to you naturally as you write or, if you put things in the right order to begin with, you may not need them at all.

Miss Margot says...

“When I’m writing articles for a newspaper, magazine, or website, I often go through this kind of process to assess my organization. And if I don’t, my editors make me! It may seem like more work than you’re used to doing, but I promise that just these five tips alone will make your writing more interesting and easier to read.”

Auspicious Beginnings

Auspicious. Now that's an unusual word. Sounds like *suspicious*. So you're probably suspicious about why I used it. Well, it just happened to be the perfect word to say what I wanted to say.

According to my favorite online dictionary, *auspicious* means “marked by lucky signs or good omens, and therefore by the promise of success or happiness.” So what do lucky signs and good omens have to do with writing the beginning of a piece?

The beginning of a piece is special because readers use it to decide if they want to read the rest. In the first few sentences, they're looking for a sign, some indication, however faint, that reading the remainder will be an enjoyable experience. The beginning is like a promise that says, “If you like this, you'll love the rest.”

School Daze

When I was a kid in school, I didn't think about the beginnings of my pieces, so most of them started with boring lines like, “One day...,” or “Last week...,” or even worse, “Hi, my name is Steve and this is my story.” I guess my teachers were happy I put down anything at all. Even as I grew up, went to college, and started writing professionally, I didn't pay much attention to beginnings. I just started with the first thing that popped into my head. I never realized that good writers put so much effort into crafting their opening lines.

But you don't have to stumble along blindly like I did. There's so much to learn from the way successful writers start their pieces. Often, the most artful writing in an entire piece will occur at the beginning. Serious writers spend serious time trying out many possibilities before settling on the exact words that seem just right.

Nowadays, as a reader, I pay close attention to how other writers' pieces begin. Sometimes, especially when I'm reading a newspaper or magazine, I'll read the beginnings of several different pieces in order to find the one I like best. I also try to remember the kinds of beginnings that seem most effective to me so I can use the same techniques in my own writing.

Read Like a Writer: Looking at Beginnings

Start noticing beginnings. If you're reading newspaper and magazine articles, pay close attention to the opening paragraphs. If you're reading a novel, remember that each chapter has its own beginning. In the course of your everyday reading, you might come in contact with a variety of different beginnings. Each one is an opportunity to learn something new.

Students sometimes ask me how long the beginning of a piece is supposed to be. That's a fair question. Unfortunately, it doesn't have a fair answer. How long should the beginning be? That depends.

Different writers strive for different effects with their beginnings, and some of those effects take longer to develop in the mind of the reader. Sometimes, a single sentence is all a writer needs for a perfect launch. More often, however, beginnings take several sentences or an entire paragraph to develop fully—some might even stretch to two or three.

Regardless of how long a beginning actually is, it has to do its work quickly. You may have only ten to fifteen seconds to win a reader over. That's maybe fifty to seventy-five words for the average adult, even less if you're writing for kids.

Because beginnings are so important, and because you have to create one for every piece you write, opening lines are an excellent thing to focus on in your quest to be a better writer. In fact, I might go so far as to say that you could improve your writing more by creating better beginnings than by focusing on any other single thing.

Activity: Collect Your Favorite Beginnings

The best way to learn about beginnings is to study the ones other writers use. Start collecting beginnings you like. Whenever you see one, jot it down somewhere. After you've collected a dozen or so, look the whole group over and start modeling your beginnings after the ones you like best.

Activity: Write Multiple Beginnings for Every Piece

Start writing more than one beginning for every piece. When I'm working in classrooms, I make kids write at least three. Some professional writers try ten to twenty before they settle on the one they like best. Not only does this give you different choices for starting a piece, it generates interesting material you can often use later on.

Miss Margot says....

"In journalism, we make a distinction between the "lead" and the "top" of a story. The lead is usually just the first sentence or first paragraph, while the top is really the entire beginning as a whole. When I write an article, I don't just think about that first sentence or first paragraph, I think about the entire top of the story. Focusing on the whole way I want to get the story rolling guarantees it will be interesting enough for people to keep reading once they get past my lead."

Ten Auspicious Beginnings

Learning from the beginnings other writers use is one of the best ways to get better. You'd be amazed at how many you come across in an average day. Most aren't anything special. But some will be perfect examples of techniques you can borrow for your own work.

Below you'll find ten different kinds of beginnings. Each kind has a name that's easy to remember. I've also told you a bit about why I like them and why I think they work.

1. Start with a Question

Do you hate homework? Do you wonder why it was even invented? Can you imagine how great it would be to come home in the afternoon and be able to watch TV, play video games, or have a snack without having to think about school?

If you ask your readers a question at the beginning, they will find themselves wanting to answer it, and this will draw them in. Sometimes, as in this case, you don't actually answer the question. In other situations, you might choose to answer immediately in the opening or gradually throughout the piece. The question beginning is one of the easiest to write. But don't use it too often or it will lose its effectiveness.

2. Start with a Sound

Crack! The ball flew off my bat and sailed over the pitcher's head. Crash! The glass shattered as my home run hit the home across the street and destroyed our neighbor's living room window.

Starting with a sound is a simple but effective way to get your readers' attention. In this opening paragraph, the writer uses two sounds and a technique called "parallelism" to make the beginning even more interesting. Parallelism in this example refers to the fact that the two pairs of sentences have the same structure—a very short "sound" sentence followed by a longer "description" sentence.

3. Start with a Description

The campfire crackled. Glowing orange sparks shot into the sky and floated up until they cooled and faded away. Six friends huddled around the flames listening to the night.

Starting with a description is often a great way to set a mood. The people on this camping trip seem to be enjoying the outdoors. The writer is trying to pull us into the scene so we can hear the fire and see the sparks. The phrase "listening to the night" suggests that even though this group is feeling relaxed, they are also alert and paying attention to everything around them.

4. Start with a Thought

This is it. I'm going to die, I thought to myself, as I closed my eyes, gripped the steering wheel tightly, and prepared for impact.

This is the opening sentence from my car accident story. Starting with a thought gets the readers' attention because normally we can't tell what other people are thinking. But with this technique, we can get inside someone's head and eavesdrop on a personal monolog. It's like listening in on a conversation we're not supposed to hear.

5. Start with Conversation

“We're moving.”

That's what she told me. I couldn't believe it! I had just made the basketball team and was making more friends.

“What?!” I exclaimed.

Most of us can't resist listening in on a good conversation. That's why most readers like dialog. It's even better if you can introduce a conflict like the writer does here. I love how sparse the dialog is; it's only three words. But the writer gives us a great sense of how final the decision is and how frustrated the kid feels.

6. Start with Strong Feelings

My heart jumped up in my throat as I raised my fist. I was sweating like a pig and my knees felt weak. I was so scared about what might happen next that no one heard my timid tapping at the door. So I stood there, in the cold, waiting— anxious, confused, and embarrassed.

This writer is obviously dealing with many feelings, all of them bad. As readers we can't help but wonder why. And that's the key to starting with feelings. Even though we have no idea what has happened or what will happen next, we can still relate to the person in this scene because we've experienced the same feeling, or something like it, at some time in our own lives.

7. Start with a List

Darkness. Kids running wild. Crazy costumes. All that candy. And scaring people. Of all the holidays in the year, I love Halloween the most.

Starting with a list is a great technique. It's one of the simplest ways to begin, and it always gets your readers' attention because you don't use complete sentences. Here, the writer gives us a list of descriptive elements without any context. We're left guessing about the topic. Each item in the list is a sentence fragment—a group of words that isn't a fully formed thought—and this adds to our feeling of wanting more information. Finally, the writer reveals the subject and, thankfully, gives us a complete sentence so we can feel that the trail of ideas has come to a proper stopping point.

8. Start with the Past in the Present

It is Saturday, December 7, 1941. Some Americans are sleeping in. Others are up early for holiday shopping. At colleges around the country, millions turn their attention to football. Almost no one is thinking about war.

In the opening of this research paper on the Pearl Harbor attack, the writer is writing about the past but using the present tense. This pulls readers into the piece by giving us the feeling that the action is happening right now instead of long ago. This technique can make history come alive for your readers. But use it sparingly; it gets old fast.

9. Start with an Interesting Story

On a dark December night in 1776, as he led a barefoot brigade of ragged revolutionaries across the icy Delaware River, George Washington said, “Shift your fat behind, Harry. But slowly or you’ll swamp the darn boat.”

In addition to exhibiting some nice sentence structure, this beginning ends with something we don’t expect to hear from the Father of Our Country. It’s funny and it also serves as a good example of the writer’s thesis for this research paper: that George Washington was a pretty normal guy and not the aloof, untouchable leader we often imagine. The writer is using a technique called an “anecdote.” An anecdote is a little story within a larger piece that serves as an example of an important point.

10. Start with Fantasy or Fairy-Tale Language

In the good old days, long, long ago, when most movies were black and white, and popcorn only cost a nickel, my grandpa used to take me every Saturday to a double-feature show.

This is the opening to an essay where a kid reminisces about his grandpa. The beginning stands out because he writes it up as though it happened long, long ago in fairy-tale time. It's a true story, but this type of beginning fictionalizes it just a bit, and that makes it sound like it's going to be more fun than the typical "When I was a kid" essay. This style of beginning gives the piece a child-like, mystical quality that fits the subject matter perfectly.

Miss Margot says...

I use many different types of beginnings in my articles, but my favorites are the question lead and the story lead. I use these especially when I'm stuck or short on time because I know they will work for almost any article. Sometimes I'll use them to help me get into a story I'm not excited about. Once they've helped me get started, I can go back later and write a different lead that's more effective.

Happy Endings

Has this ever happened to you? You go to a movie, one you think you're really going to like. It starts out great and gets better and better. You think it's one of the best movies you've ever seen. Until the last minute. The ending is so disappointing that you walk out of the theater feeling bad, like you got ripped off.

We've all had this experience at one time or another. And it just goes to show how important—and powerful—endings can be. You can like ninety-nine percent of a movie, but if the one percent you don't like is the last one percent, the whole thing seems ruined.

It's the same with writing.

Just like moviegoers, readers want the experience of feeling satisfied at the end. That's not always easy. As writers, we often work on a piece for a long time and then, at some point, we just feel like stopping. It's as if we want to go back to the good old days when we were in kindergarten and every story ended with "The End."

But that won't get the job done now.

So what's a hard-working writer to do? You have to have an ending for every piece you write. And it has to be a good one. That's a lot of pressure to deal with. And pressure doesn't always make your writing better. So let's think a little about reading, instead.

Everything you read has an ending. Novels have endings for every single chapter. By paying attention to the endings you experience as a reader, you'll get a better sense of how to produce them as a writer.

Read Like a Writer: Looking at Endings

Start noticing the endings of the things you read. Flip through a magazine and read only the last few paragraphs of each article. Or hit the web and scroll to the bottom of each page. It's better, of course, to read an entire piece and then read the ending. But you'd be surprised how much you can learn through studying endings all by themselves.

One thing you'll start to notice about endings is that they all have a certain feeling to them. A good ending just *feels* right. This is not an easy thing to pick up as a reader, nor is it easy to master as a writer. But as you read more endings, and write more endings, you'll begin to know what that feeling is.

Endings are hard, no doubt about it. And sometimes the way we study them in school makes them even harder. When I was a student, my teachers told me that an ending was supposed to restate and summarize what I'd already written in a piece. That always seemed awkward to me but I tried to do it anyway, even though I didn't think it made sense to repeat something my reader had already read.

Later on, in college and then in the professional world, I discovered that restating and summarizing wasn't going to get me very far. Endings, I learned, needed to do more than merely repeat what the reader already knew. A good ending goes beyond what has already been written to give readers something interesting to think about. It should also show readers why what they've read is important. You can't do that by repeating yourself.

For all the challenges that endings present, we can count on having one thing on our side: the reader. Just like you want to see a great ending to your favorite movie, readers are rooting for you to end with something satisfying, too.

You don't always have to write a typically "happy" ending. But with every ending you write, you should try to make your readers happy. When your last words linger in their minds long after they've turned the final page, you'll know you've been successful and that your work has had an impact.

Activity: Collect Your Favorite Endings

The best way to learn about endings is to study the ones that other writers use. Start collecting endings you like. Whenever you see one, jot it down somewhere. After you've collected a dozen or so, look the whole group over and start modeling your own endings after the ones you like best.

Activity: Write Multiple Endings for Every Piece

Start writing more than one ending for every piece. When I'm working in classrooms, I make kids write at least two. Endings are harder to write than beginnings, so try to be patient with yourself. Sometimes you may find you can combine parts of two or three possible endings into the single perfect ending.

Miss Margot Says...

"There are times when I just can't get a story to end. I've said everything I have to say, but it doesn't feel like it's over. When I get stuck like this, I go back to my beginning and see if I can do a little trick called "bookending." Bookending means ending a story with the same thing you used to start it off. I don't mean reusing your opening word for word, or restating and summarizing your piece; it's more like giving the ideas in your opening a slightly different slant that reminds your readers of where they started out. For example, if you started with a question, can you answer it at the end? Or if you introduced a story, can you finish it off? Doing this helps you begin and end the story with a similar style or idea that literally holds your piece together just like bookends hold books together on a shelf."

Ten Happy Endings

Just as we did with beginnings, let's look at ten great ending strategies, too. One thing you might notice is that they all have a similar feeling to them. Beyond just learning a few ending strategies, it's important to get to know what a good ending feels like because this is how most writers create them.

1. End with Advice

There are many activities you can choose to make your birthday celebration an unforgettable one. But if you're thinking about skydiving, take my advice: Stop thinking. In years to come, I'm going back to good old cake and ice cream.

It just seems like part of being human to want to tell other humans how we think they should live their lives. As one of my favorite sayings goes, "Take my advice. I'm not using it." But more to the point, it makes for a good ending. Readers want value from what they read, and some of that value can come in the form of advice you offer about an issue in your piece, especially if it's offered simply, cleverly, or with a special twist.

2. End with Strong Feelings

As I drove away, I was overwhelmed by my emotions. I was still shaking a little from the collision and I was angry that my car had been so badly damaged. But I realized I was also very thankful. A few feet one way or the other and I could have been killed. But I wasn't hurt at all. As strange as it seemed, I felt like this was the luckiest day of my life.

Sometimes, at the end of an important experience, we're left with very strong feelings. Describing those feelings, and trying to explain how they arose, makes for a satisfying ending, especially if the feelings we're describing are complex, contradictory, or in some other way surprising.

3. End with Something You Want Your Readers to Do

Make a commitment to getting in shape today. Turn off the television, put down whatever it is you're reading (unless it's this essay, of course), and start living a healthy life right now. You'll be glad you did.

This type of ending can be very powerful. Telling your readers to go out and do something is a big deal because most of us don't like to do the things other people tell us to do. But if what you have to say is important, this type of ending might be just what you're looking for.

4. End by Talking About the Future

Last year was definitely the hardest, craziest year of my life. And I loved it! Things are going great. I never knew the incredible feeling of accomplishing things that in the past seemed impossible—not only with school, but with my entire life. Every day is another chance to do something great. And now I have the confidence and motivation to conquer anything in front of me. I feel I owe this to many things and to many people, but most of all I owe it to myself. Now I think about the consequences of everything I do and say. And this helps me make better decisions, decisions that help me build a better future. The future! For the first time I’m looking forward to it.

In this essay, the writer has just come through a long set of challenging experiences and is looking ahead to a better life. Most of us think about our hopes for the future all the time. It’s a normal, natural thing. And I think that’s why this type of ending feels normal and natural, too.

5. End with Something You Learned

I learned that I shouldn’t lie because it gets me into worse trouble. If I’m ever in this situation again, I’m not going to lie. The next time I have a problem, I’m going to tell someone about it and ask for help.

This is the classic “moral of the story” ending most of us remember from when our parents read us bedtime stories. But if it’s heartfelt, it makes a perfectly good ending for older kids and even adults, too.

6. End with a Recommendation

Even after all the bad things that happened, it was still a fun evening and the food was delicious. If you go there, I can't guarantee you won't have all the problems we did. But I can recommend this restaurant to any family looking for something a bit out of the ordinary.

Much like the “advice” ending, the “recommendation” ending also tells the reader to go out and do (or not do) something. But it's a little friendlier. It feels more like a suggestion or an invitation than a demand.

7. End with a Question

Back in April, when they threw out the first ball, no one in Seattle expected such success. But as this miracle Mariner season comes to a close, the one thought on every fan's mind is this: Can they do it again next year?

If you can start a piece with a question, can you end a piece with a question, too? Why do writers use questions so often? Why are questions so effective in writing? Would it be possible to create a piece entirely out of questions? Does this paragraph give you any hints about that?

8. End by Hinting at a Sequel

And so ends another after-school adventure—or misadventure, I should say. Stay tuned for more exciting escapades as a kid with not enough homework to keep him out of trouble, and way too many crazy ideas, battles boredom in the afternoon.

If you liked the original, you'll probably like the sequel, too. At least that's the thinking behind this type of ending. Writers love to be read. And some are not merely content with the fact that you're reading their current piece—they want you to read their next piece, too. So they put a little advertisement for it right in the ending.

9. End with an Evaluation

Sometimes disasters can be fun, and bad luck can bring people closer together. Even with all the trouble we had getting there, and the many unpleasant surprises we encountered during our stay, we all agreed that this was our best family vacation ever.

Often, when we find ourselves at the end of something, we want to make a judgment about it. We look back over the entire experience and ask ourselves: Was it good? Was it bad? How did things turn out? What's the bottom line? And if we find a good way to sum it up, our readers feel satisfied, too.

10. End with a Wish, a Hope, or a Dream

I hope someday I can be a good parent just like my mom. I don't know how she does it, how she always seem to know what to do when things go wrong, and how she stays so positive all the time. I guess there are a lot of things about parenting I have to learn. So for now, I'll just work on being a kid.

This is similar to the “future” ending but it's a bit more subtle and perhaps a bit more effective, too. Most of us have our own wishes, hopes, and dreams, so we can't help but identify with someone else's.

Order in the Court

You've seen it a million times on TV. A lawyer questions a witness and things get tense. Then another lawyer jumps in with an objection. Observers in the gallery start yelling and screaming. Then we hear the piercing thwack of the judge's gavel and a voice booms out over everyone: "Order! Order in the court!"

If you don't put things in the right order, readers may judge your writing and find you guilty of confusion. The best organization requires that you choose the best sequence for the different parts of your piece. Sequencing refers to the order in which things occur—what comes first, what comes next, what comes after that, and so on. It isn't something we think about much. If we're telling a story, we just tell it from beginning to end. If we're presenting information, we often let the material organize itself. But in both cases, when we don't explore other options, we miss opportunities to make our case as strong as it can be.

Sequencing in Narrative Writing

You can think of narrative writing as any kind of story writing, whether it's a true story, a story you've made up, or something in between. In narrative writing, we set out to tell a story from beginning to end in the order that it happens—or at least that's what the reader assumes. Playing with this assumption gives you a number of interesting organizational strategies to explore:

- **Move the beginning.** You don't have to start with the first thing that happens. In fact, you can start your story anywhere along the timeline representing its sequence of events. For example, if I'm writing about having a car accident on the freeway during morning rush hour, should I start when I wake up in the morning? When I first get into my car? When I hit the freeway? When I get stuck in a traffic jam? Each choice makes my story feel a bit different. The closer I start to when the accident actually happened, the more my story is likely to feel fast-paced and intense.

- **Move the ending.** Just like I can choose where to start, I can choose where to end, too. Should I end my car accident story when the truck hits me? When I drive my car away? When my car finally gets fixed? Or how about months later when I almost end up in an identical accident? Each choice gives the story a different quality. The farther I move the ending from the accident itself, the less important the crash is likely to seem.

- **Start with the big moment.** Normally, stories start out slow and build gradually until they reach the most important part of the piece. I call this part "the big moment." In my car accident story, this is the moment when I was hit by the truck. What if, instead of putting that moment late in the story and building up to it, I started with it right off the bat? I'm sure this would get my readers' attention, and I might end up with an even more powerful piece.

- **Start with the ending and then go back to the beginning.** As strange as this seems, we come across it all the time. In my case, I would start with the fact that I had an accident and then go back and tell how it happened. Some mystery stories work this way when they are told by the main character. If you've read *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* by Avi you know exactly what I mean.

- **Tell the entire story backwards.** This is hard but it can be done. I've seen it mostly on television and in the movies, where the visual medium can switch scenes easily.
- **Tell the story out of order (with clues).** Just because your readers assume a story is told in order, doesn't mean you have to tell it that way. You can jumble up the parts as much as you like, as long as you've left your readers enough clues to put the story back together in a satisfying way.
- **Tell more than one related story at a time.** Imagine if I told my car accident story from two different perspectives at the same time: mine and that of the guy who hit me. I could describe two seemingly unrelated stories and then smash them together just as the accident happens. Again, many books take a similar approach. *Holes* by Louis Sachar is a good example.

There's a lot more to narrative sequencing than just telling a story from beginning to end. But you have to explore your options. First, write down the simple chronology of events, and then play around with different beginnings, different endings, or even a different order altogether.

Read Like a Writer: Newspaper Order

Newspaper stories, especially those you find on the front page or in the "A" section, are often written in an interesting order. Can you figure out how they work? Read several "straight news" stories from the first section of your local paper and see if you can figure out how the writers of these pieces planned their sequencing. How do you think they decided what should come first? How did they know where to end?

Miss Margot says...

“Figuring out what goes where can be hard. When I’m feeling challenged in this way, I just start somewhere, anywhere. I’ll write one section and then another and then another. Sometimes, the order finds *me*. Other times, I get all the sections written, and then I have to move them around until the order feels right. Usually, I read all these versions out loud to see which one sounds the best. This is almost always the one that reads the best, too.”

Sequencing in Non-Narrative Writing

You can think of non-narrative writing as any writing that isn’t a story. In this case, we’re presenting different pieces of information about a topic as opposed to following something that happens along a timeline. For example, instead of telling the story of my own car accident, imagine I’m writing a magazine article on the dangers of driving on the freeway during rush hour. There’s no story here to tell, no single thing that happens. But I still have to figure out the best way to put my information in order.

Making decisions about what goes where in a non-narrative piece can be tricky. And often there’s no right answer. But there are a few things we can think about to help us get the job done well:

- **Know all the parts of your story.** One of the things that makes narrative writing easier than non-narrative writing is that you don’t need to have the entire story worked out before you start. If you want, you can just pick a starting point and tell what happened from there. But in a non-narrative piece, there is no “what happened from there.” So before you can do much about your sequencing, it’s helpful to know what each part of the story will contain.

- **Pick an interesting part to start.** Readers are very forgiving about the beginnings of narrative pieces. They know that stories often start out slow and build. But readers feel differently about non-narrative pieces. They expect to get interesting information right off the bat from their non-narrative reading, so we have to make sure we choose an interesting part to start with. One trick we can use is to start a non-narrative piece with a narrative. This is called starting with an *anecdote*. An anecdote is a very brief story (often just a few paragraphs) used to emphasize an important point. For example, my car accident story could be used in my magazine article as an example of how dangerous rush hour driving is.

- **Move from part to part through logical relationships.** In a narrative piece, we move from part to part simply by moving forward in time. But in a non-narrative piece, we don't have a timeline, so we have to use logic instead. This means trying to understand what readers are thinking as they read and giving them a logical reason, like a stepping stone, each time they move to a new part. For example, if my magazine article contained a part with statistics about the most dangerous freeways in the area, and one of them happened to be the road where I had my accident, it might make sense to put those two parts next to each other.

- **Know what you're going to end with.** In a narrative piece, deciding on the ending is simply a matter of figuring out where to stop along the timeline. But in a non-narrative piece, just about any part of my story could be used as the end. To make my ending as effective as possible, I want to pick a part that will make a significant impact on my reader.

If you're thinking that sequencing narrative pieces is easier than sequencing non-narrative pieces, you're absolutely right. Telling a story simply involves following a timeline from beginning to end. Following logic is more complicated because you have to map out your thinking very carefully—and hope that your readers will be thinking that way, too.

Miss Margot says...

I have to think about sequencing all the time. Most of the articles I write are about complicated issues like building houses for poor people, how much it costs to rent office space in a major city, or how businesses can better train their employees. There's no clear beginning or ending with that kind of stuff. What helps me wrap up the article is usually a quote, an idea from someone I talked to, or some research I did earlier that made me go, "Aha! I get it now."

In addition to using these strategies, there is one simple thing that usually works when I'm presenting non-narrative information to my readers: Explain things in the order that I figured them out. After all, before I could present the information, I first had to learn it myself. And though I probably didn't learn it in the ideal order, I eventually figured it out in a way that made sense to me. If I can describe it that way to my readers, it'll probably make sense to them, too.

Read Like a Writer: Discovering the Parts

You can learn a lot about organization from digging into the organizational structures of the writing you read. But to understand organizational structure, you have to discover the parts the author used to compose a piece. To practice this, take a magazine article that runs three or more pages. With a marker, put a note in the margin each time the writer moves to a new part in the piece. As each new part begins, write down a word or phrase that tells what that part is about. If it's not obvious, complete this sentence, "This is the part where...." Notice how writers move from one part to another. Notice, too, how many parts there are in the piece and how long the parts are relative to the whole.

Pace Yourself

When runners compete in long races like marathons, they have to pace themselves carefully. This means that at certain times in the race, they have to make sure they are going at just the right speed. Too fast at the beginning, and they'll tire themselves out. Too slow, and they'll be too far behind the leaders to catch up at the end.

Writers have to pace themselves, too. But instead of burning up energy, they burn up words as they move from section to section in a piece. You can think of the speed at which a piece of writing moves forward as being determined by the number of words a writer uses to describe a given part. The more words a writer spends on a part, the slower the piece moves along. When a writer moves from part to part with very few words, the pace quickens and the piece speeds up.

Here's a fast-paced approach to telling the beginning of my car accident story:

I woke up and looked at the clock. I was late. I quickly threw on some clothes and ran out to the car. A few minutes later, I was on the freeway trying to make up for lost time. Then I noticed the traffic slowing down in front of me. Before I knew it, I was stopped. The people around me were turning off their engines. We were going to be here a while. But one engine behind me wasn't turning off. Instead, it was revving up. This was when I knew I was about to be hit.

And here's the same story told at a much slower pace:

I woke up disoriented. Something was wrong; there was too much light. I looked at the clock and noticed I had slept well past the time I was supposed to wake up. I must have set my alarm wrong the night before, so I had to move quickly. I thought about taking a shower but figured I could save time if I skipped it. I found some clean clothes and put them on without worrying about how they looked. Then I hopped into the bathroom to brush my teeth and figure out what to do with my hair.

Both of these passages are ninety-eight words long. But the first one covers a much bigger chunk of the story than the second one does. In the first passage, I used my ninety-eight words to get myself up, out of bed, dressed, out to my car, onto the freeway, and stuck in a traffic jam right in front of a speeding truck that hasn't realized the cars in front of it are completely stopped. In the second passage, I didn't even get out of the house.

So how do you manage pacing in a story? In a word: *detail*. The more details you add to a part, the slower it goes by. This is good. When you're using many details, you can make your readers slow down and pay attention. But if you kept up the same heavy use of details in every part of a piece, your readers would get bored. This is when it's handy to thin things down and pick up the pace.

TIP: Sentence length can also have an effect on pacing. In parts that feature many short sentences in a row, the pace will seem to quicken. Long sentences make the pace seem slower. But this is different than using details to control pacing. For one thing, writers can't write for very long using only short or long sentences. So it's hard to control the pacing for more than a paragraph or two with this approach.

In general, the more important a part is, the more detail you should include about it. After all, if something is important, you want your readers to slow down and pay attention to it. But you don't want to keep them slowed down all the time.

Readers, like runners, have to pace themselves, too, especially if they're reading something long. By controlling the amount of details you use, and by carefully mixing more detailed, slower-paced sections with lighter, faster-paced sections, you can make sure your audience reaches the finish line every time.

Read Like a Writer: Embrace the Pace

The next time you sit down to read a story, make an effort to notice the pacing. First, try to identify the parts of the story as you move along. Then start asking questions. Where does the writer speed up and slow down? What's going on in the story when the writer uses more details? Why does the writer move quickly through some parts but not others?

Putting It Together

You can think of a piece of writing as a collection of different parts. In my car accident story, for example, there's the part where I wake up late. Then there's the part where I get out of the house. Then there's the part where I'm stuck on the freeway. And so on. We can easily identify these parts as being separate from the rest but I don't have a whole piece until I put them all together.

So the question is, "How do you put different parts together to make a whole piece?" And the answer is, "With transitions."

Transitions help readers move easily from part to part without getting confused. To do this, readers have to know three things: when one part ends, when the next part begins, and what the relationship is between the two parts.

We often think of transitions as little words and phrases like "then" or "next" or "after a while." But that's only part of the story.

The Best Transition Is No Transition

Ideally, we'd like our readers to be able to move from part to part simply because it makes sense to do so. If the first thing we write leads logically to the second, and the second to the third, and so on, our readers should be able to follow it without needing little words and phrases to string things together.

Take a look at this example from a college entrance essay I wrote:

I can still remember the first time I wanted to be a better writer. I was applying to transfer from the small school where I started to the big one where I really wanted to go. And I *really* wanted to go there. But I had to write two essays for my admissions application.

The first college I attended had not required admissions essays. In fact, it required so little of me with regard to writing, I didn't have to take the required freshman and sophomore English classes. To make matters worse, I was a music major there. While I spent many hours writing music, I almost never wrote a sentence.

There I was, twenty years old, needing to write a couple of sharp essays to convince a big university I was worthy of being admitted, and I discovered I didn't write very well. Truth is, I wrote okay. I was able to complete a slightly confused and rambling first draft of any essay I was assigned, but that was about it. In reading over what I'd written, I could tell my pieces had problems. But I couldn't figure out how to fix them. I didn't know how to make my own writing better, or how to make myself a better writer in the process.

I spent weeks on my admissions application, fretting every moment about my essays, and was eventually accepted. Two years later I got my degree—in English no less, a subject where I had to write all the time. But struggling with those essays made it painfully clear to me that I needed to be a better writer. I wanted to be better, too, because I was beginning to see that writing well was the key to many interesting opportunities.

Each paragraph in this example is a different part of my piece. And yet I'm moving from part to part without transitions between paragraphs. How does that work? How am I connecting each new paragraph to the previous paragraph so my readers understand how the two paragraphs relate?

I'm using a strategy I call "referring back." Notice how each new paragraph refers back to something in the previous paragraph. This connects the set of paragraphs together like links in a chain.

Referring back is an easy strategy to use. (See, I just used it!) All you do is look back at the previous paragraph, pick out an important element you want to say more about, and refer to it in the new paragraph.

Each new paragraph (There I go again!) builds logically on the one that comes before. There's no need for transitional phrases, and your readers feel comfortable following along. If it was possible to write this way all the time, the whole topic of transitions wouldn't exist. But it isn't, so let's look at other approaches to moving from part to part in a piece.

Read Like a Reader: Can You Find a Transition?

Great writers work hard to minimize the use of transitional words and phrases. Instead, they concentrate on writing so well that their pieces move smoothly and naturally from part to part without ever confusing the reader. Take a look at the novel you're reading now or some other high-quality writing. Look for transitional words and phrases. Can you find very many of them?

Conversational Transitions

If you were to tell someone a story about something that happened to you, you would naturally throw in transitions from time to time. Each time you got to a new part of your story, you'd introduce it with something like, "After we left the movie..." or "When I got home from school..." or "All of a sudden..." That's what transitions do—they introduce the next part of the piece.

While we should always try to move smoothly from part to part without using transitional phrases, there's nothing wrong at all with the occasional conversational transition. Conversational transitions sound normal and natural, just like you're speaking to the reader. And that's the key: if your transitions don't sound like you're speaking to the reader, you'll probably be able to hear it when you read it back, especially if you read it out loud.

School Transitions

These aren't really called "school transitions" but I like to call them that because most people are introduced to them in school. At some point, if it hasn't happened already, your teacher will talk to you about transitions and give you a big list of transition words to study. These will be words like "then," "next," "finally," "but," "however," and "therefore." Your teacher may even tell you to use them to transition from paragraph to paragraph. This may or may not work for you. (It didn't work well for me.)

Of course, school transitions are legitimate transitions, and writers use them all the time. But I think the way we teach them to kids makes learning to use them very hard. If you're having a hard time with school transitions, remember that you've been using normal, natural conversational transitions all your life. Stick with those. That's what worked best for me.

TIP: Regardless of what anyone at school tells you, you do not need a transition word or phrase to introduce each paragraph. In fact, doing this can make your writing seem repetitive and even immature.

Heading Transitions

Perhaps the easiest transition to use is a good subhead, or what I like to call a “heading transition.” Take a look at this entire section on transitions. See how I’ve broken it up into different parts by using different headings? (“The Best Transition Is No Transition,” “Conversational Transitions,” “School Transitions,” and “Heading Transitions.”) Instead of worrying about referring back or using a conversational transition or a school transition, I just end a part wherever I want to and plunk down a heading to begin the next part.

Heading transitions are very popular. You see them in newspapers, magazines, on the web, and in most kinds of nonfiction texts. They’re also used a lot in textbooks. Headings are used less frequently in fiction and other types of narrative writing, but you’ll still see them every once in a while.

Headings are helpful to readers because they clearly point out what’s coming up next. They also make longer texts easier to scan because the reader can see the organizational structure and skip quickly from section to section to find specific information.

The only hard part about a heading transition is coming up with the right heading. A heading is really just a title. But it’s a title for a single section, not an entire piece. If coming up with interesting titles is something you enjoy, I highly recommend using headings as your transition strategy of choice when moving from section to section.

Miss Margot says...

Journalists are always looking for ways to get readers into the story, and that's why you see so many of us using "heading transitions." Fancy editors call them "points of entry," and not-so-fancy writers call them "subheads." Whatever you call them, they're not just good for transitioning, they're good for getting your reader's attention, just in case the headline or lead didn't. Subheads are usually offset in some way—with extra spacing, a larger font size, bold formatting, or all three—so they're hard for readers to miss. Having several points of entry in a story, especially if it's a long one, makes it easier for readers to find their way and stay engaged.