# ORGANIZE

S T R U C T U R E   M A T T E R S

# CONTENTS

## LINK & LEARN

| Required Reading | Tips & Optional | Examples | Activity |
|---|---|---|---|

This is Chapter 4

# We don't like chaos.

Have you ever been frustrated while searching for something important in your junk drawer, in piles of paper on your desk, or in unlabeled boxes in the basement?

Chaos can make us uncomfortable not only in our physical surroundings, but also in our communications. Communicating works better when we follow a few basic organizing principles so that our **audience knows what to expect**.

This chapter will introduce you to the following:

- The importance of **organizing** your written and oral communication.
- A few helpful ways to impose structure by using an **outline**.
- An organizing template that can be applied to nearly all business communications: **the 4A structure**.

## GET ORGANIZED

### 1.8 HOURS

The amount of time an average office employee spends searching for information per day.

*Cottrill Research*
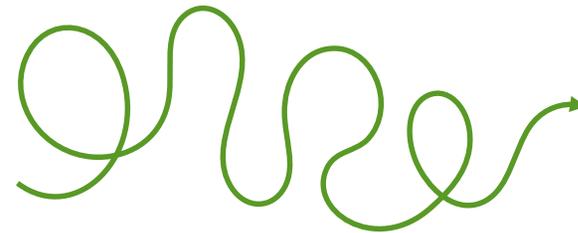
FIGURE 4.1

# ORGANIZE INFORMATION

In business communication, a jumbled stream of thoughts—in a voicemail, a report to your boss, or an email to a supplier—carries a meta-message that you're incompetent. Beyond limiting your career prospects, rambling messages can also cost your company clients or tarnish its image, resulting in direct financial losses.

**Thoughtless & Unprepared**

1      2      3      ACTION      **Smart & Capable**

# STRUCTURE FOR CLARITY

Powerful communication requires organization. Chapter 3 introduced the **PASS** acronym:

**P** Identify the PURPOSE

**A** Know the AUDIENCE

**S** Choose the STRATEGY

**S** Create a STRUCTURE

In Chapter 3, we explored writing with a purpose, writing for an audience, and choosing a strategy. In this chapter we focus on creating a message **structure**.

An unorganized message causes your reader to waste time trying to understand it.

The work of organizing begins long before you start putting any words on a page, screen, or slide. Like building a house, constructing a message begins with putting up the frame—creating the bare bones structure and then finishing the detailing after.

Framing a message is called **outlining**.

Organized information is understood more quickly and **remembered UP TO 40% BETTER.**
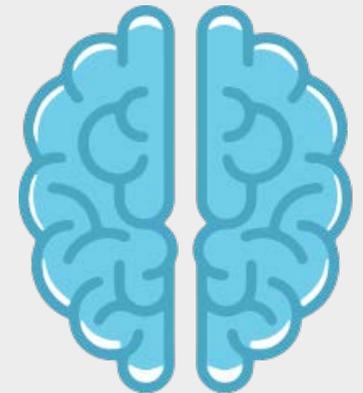
Matt Abrahams: Insights by Stanford Business

# OUTLINE

Digital word processing has enabled us to spew words onto the screen and then rearrange them as needed. However, this composition method often produces long, unorganized messages. Investing time in an outline will improve the clarity, flow, and brevity of your message. Outlining forces you to do your thinking first, producing smarter, more powerful messages.
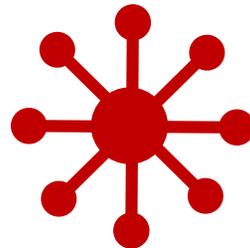
We'll examine **three approaches to outlining**:
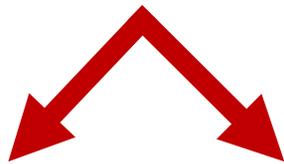
### TOP-DOWN APPROACH
*Discipline your message structure.*

When you already know the main subtopics to address.

### MIND MAPPING
*Associate visually.*

When you want to visually explore multiple aspects.

### BOTTOM-UP APPROACH
*Create order from chaos.*

When you have information but need structure and direction.

# TOP-DOWN OUTLINE

## OUTLINING AS DISCIPLINE

Top-down outlines work well when you have a clear idea of what you want to say. Producing a top-down outline allows you to logically order your ideas and provide sufficient support for each idea.

Read through the sample alphanumeric outline for a sales presentation to the right (Figure 4.2).

Notice that the alphanumeric outline uses Roman numerals to indicate the major sections and letters of the alphabet to denote subsections. Arabic numerals indicate sub-subsections, and so on.

A top-down outline is an excellent way to organize your message, especially if you have a well-developed set of ideas or structure to start with.

## SALES MEETING
### SAMPLE ALPHANUMERIC OUTLINE

I. **Introduction**
   A. **Build rapport**
   B. **State your purpose** (this is where your agenda goes. See the "4A Outline".)

II. **Customer needs**
   A. **Identify the "job to be done"**
   B. **Establish the competitor's performance**
   C. **Identify gaps in the competitor's offering**

III. **Product**
   A. **Describe superior head-to-head performance**
   B. **Introduce your product's unique features**
   C. **Highlight other advantages: cost, quality, convenience, "cool factor," etc.**

IV. **Summary and call to action**
   A. **Emphasize advantages of your solution**
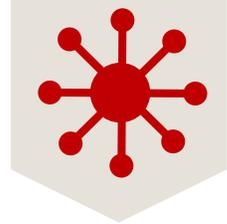   B. **Gain commitment to purchase**

FIGURE 4.2

**Need a refresher on alphanumeric outlines? Review** Purdue OWL's Types of Outlines: Alphanumeric Outlines.

# MIND MAPS

## OUTLINING AS ASSOCIATION

If your ideas are not fully developed, or if you're more of a visual thinker, you may prefer a mind map to a formal outline. The term "mind map" was coined by Tony Buzan, although the technique is centuries old. Figure 4.3 summarizes creating a mind map.

4.1 Create a mind map of the sales presentation outline on the previous page. What is gained by the mind-map approach? What, if anything, is lost?

FIGURE 4.3

## THE PROCESS OF MIND MAPPING

1. **Write the main idea in the center of a blank page.** *This gives you room to branch out in all directions.*

2. **Identify subcategories of the main idea and assign each a KEYWORD.** *Single words are more powerful and memorable. Choosing a single word forces you to think clearly and concisely.*

3. **Draw BRANCHES from your central image with labels for your subcategories.** *Draw sub-branches for the conceptual components of each category. Make use of color.*

4. **Expand your subcategories with more branches and keywords.** *This will allow you to further refine your ideas.*

5. **Draw CURVED branches.** *Straight lines feel mechanical; curved lines feel organic. You want your mind map to feel like a living, breathing organism.*

6. **Add IMAGES to the branches and sub-branches if you're more visual.** *Pictures capture ideas more succinctly and creatively than do words.*



*Mind map: CHALLENGES OF A GLOBAL ORGANIZATION*

- POLITICS: Sanctions, Inner conflicts, International conflicts, Laws
- CULTURE: Religion, Traditions, Diverse customers, Social norms
- ECONOMY: Exchange Rate, Tariffs, Exports, Trade laws
- COMMUNICATIONS: Collaboration, Technology, Flexibility, Geography
- RESOURCES: Fuel, Technology, Productivity, Demographics

# BOTTOM-UP OUTLINE

## OUTLINING AS CREATION

Bottom-up outlining is a wonderful antidote for writer's block. It can be used when writing alone or in a group. Follow three steps: brainstorm, cluster, and sequence. Figure 4.4 gives an example of outlining a reporting email.

### 1. Brainstorm

Think about your idea, and write down whatever comes to mind. Don't hold back. Capture all the facts, keywords, concepts, stories, analogies, diagrams, and related ideas you can think of.

### 2. Cluster

Next, look for patterns in your brain-stormed list. Group related items together. Make clusters of meaning, and stay open to new ideas. Notice any unusual associations between facts.
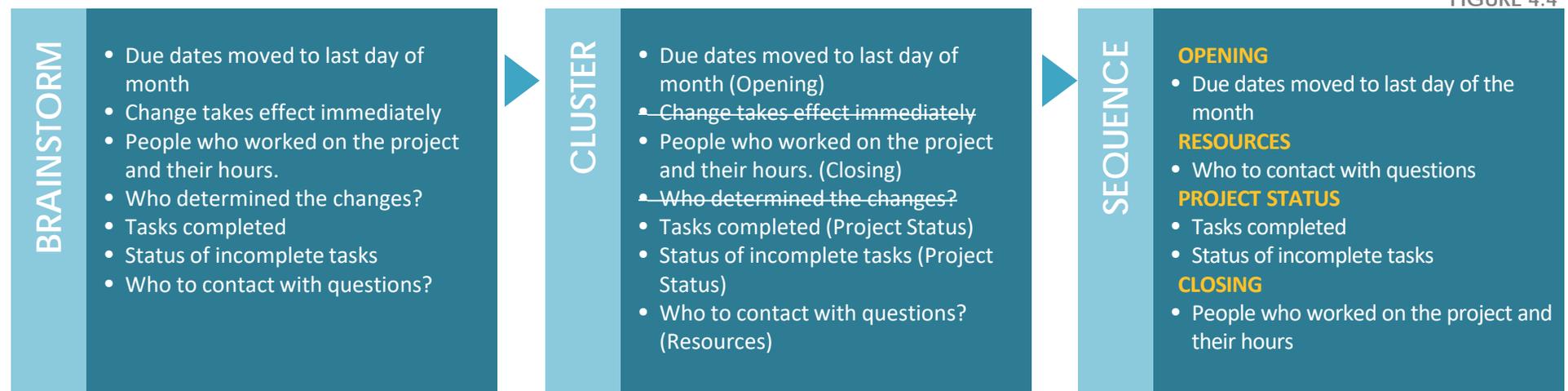
### 3. Sequence

Finally, look at your clusters and sequence them in a way that builds meaning. Pay attention to logical progression. Make sure your audience has adequate information at each step to follow your argument.

## END-OF-MONTH PROJECT REPORTING EMAIL

FIGURE 4.4

**BRAINSTORM**
- Due dates moved to last day of month
- Change takes effect immediately
- People who worked on the project and their hours.
- Who determined the changes?
- Tasks completed
- Status of incomplete tasks
- Who to contact with questions?

**CLUSTER**
- Due dates moved to last day of month (Opening)
- ~~Change takes effect immediately~~
- People who worked on the project and their hours. (Closing)
- ~~Who determined the changes?~~
- Tasks completed (Project Status)
- Status of incomplete tasks (Project Status)
- Who to contact with questions? (Resources)

**SEQUENCE**
**OPENING**
- Due dates moved to last day of the month
**RESOURCES**
- Who to contact with questions
**PROJECT STATUS**
- Tasks completed
- Status of incomplete tasks
**CLOSING**
- People who worked on the project and their hours

# TIPS FOR SEQUENCING AND ORGANIZING

## FOLLOW THE RULE OF THREE

Whether writing a long report or a short email, Bryan Garner, author of *HBR Guide to Better Business Writing*, suggests that you start with **three main points**. By narrowing the focus, you are forced to reason before you write. Garner asserts that our brains prefer groups of three. Take advantage of this innate preference and outline in groups of three.

## TELL A STORY

The oldest and most satisfying structure is a **story**. When you are writing a longer piece or giving a presentation, telling a story can be an effective structure: Set the scene, build interest and add tension by showing a problem, need, or pain. Finally, resolve it all with your brilliant insights and clear thinking. Figure 4.5 shows the elements of a story arc.

FIGURE 4.5
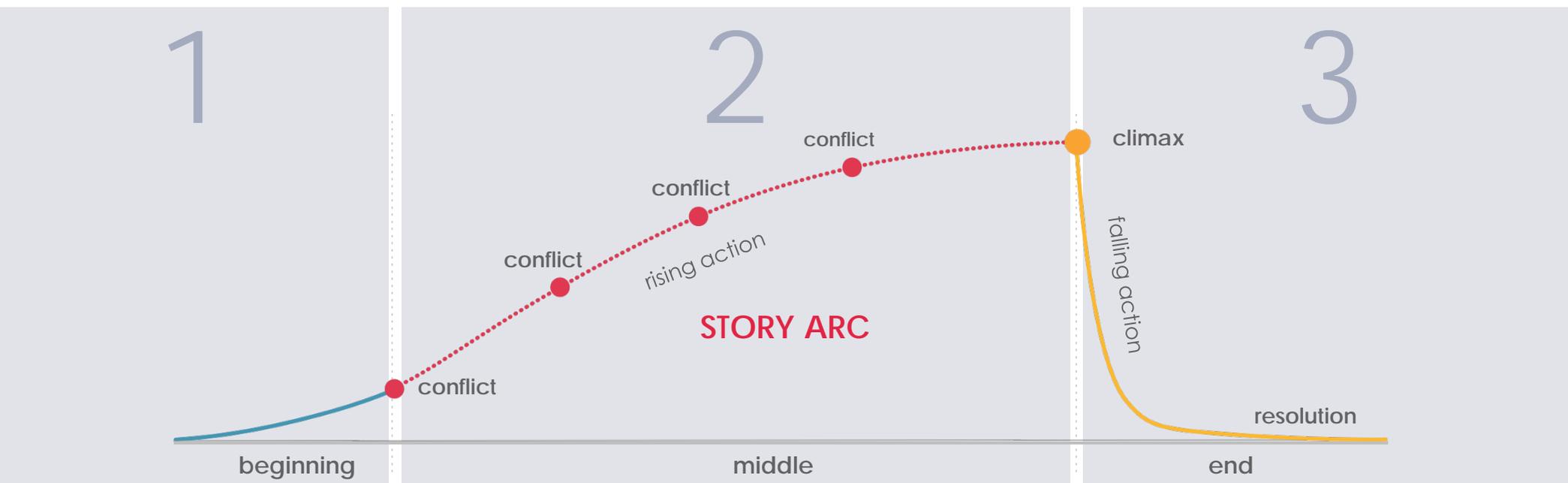
# CONVERT YOUR OUTLINE INTO HEADINGS

Headings organize your message and serve as "sign posts"—which makes reviewing and finding information quick and easy for readers. Use your outline to write your headings, tighten your key phrases, and make sure your points have parallel structure. Most word processors have an outlining feature that automatically converts your outline into a hierarchy of headings.

4.2 Create an outline by brainstorming, clustering, and sequencing your ideas on how a small business could take advantage of crowdsourcing. Create headings from the outline.

FIGURE 4.6



OUTLINE

FINAL PAPER

# CHOOSE THE RIGHT SEQUENCE

Below, author Sandra Lamb's six common ways to sequence a message are applied to the practical example of recommending the purchase of a new office computer. Read through to see which sequencing options best fit the purpose.

## SEQUENCING OPTIONS: PURCHASE OF A NEW OFFICE COMPUTER

FIGURE 4.7

| SEQUENCE | DESCRIPTION | EXAMPLE |
|---|---|---|
| CHRONOLOGICAL | What happened first, second, and so on | Itemize the computer models according to which ones you researched first, second, and so on. *(Probably NOT the best way to share the information for this scenario.)* |
| SPATIAL | According to physical placement—the location of items in relation to other items | Order the analysis according to their country of design or manufacture: model X is designed in China, model Y in South Korea, and model Z in the United States. *(Again, probably not the best way to present the information.)* |
| COMPARATIVE | The pros and cons of different options | Evaluate the various computer models by comparing features such as storage space, cost, screen size, reliability, and so forth. *(This could be the best choice.)* |
| ANALYTICAL | Based on the steps of critical thinking; answering a series of "whys?" | Answer a series of questions that are important to your audience: Why is storage space an important criterion? Why does this computer cost more than the other models? Why does this computer have low reliability scores? |
| IMPORTANCE | Advancing from least to most important information or vice versa | Sequence the information according to what matters most to your audience. If cost were most important, begin with cost and show how that narrows the choices, then continue with the next most important factors such as reliability and performance. |
| CAUSE-AND-EFFECT | How causes interact with effects | List the "causes" (or reasons) that led to the "effect" (the search for a new computer system), then present your recommendation. *(In this case, cause-effect becomes problem-solution.)* |

# 4A
# STRUCTURE

After you create an outline to clarify and sequence your content, build a solid structure for your message.

In previous writing classes, you may have learned a three-part approach to writing an essay: introduction, body, and conclusion. We modify this approach to be business- and brain-friendly. We add an agenda and re-name the sections to better reflect business style. This approach is represented by four A's:

## Attention | Agenda | Argument | Action

Take a minute to memorize this "4A" structure.

**4A**

! ATTENTION

✓ AGENDA

))) ARGUMENT

→ ACTION

# 4A

## ATTENTION

Why should your audience spend precious time and attention on your message? This is the first question you must answer. **Hook your audience** by opening with a compelling statistic, a descriptive metaphor, a relevant story, or a penetrating question—but keep it brief. In a short email, you might give key context details that motivate attention.

## AGENDA

An old public-speaking tip states that you should "tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em" at the beginning of a speech. This concept is crucial to business communication. Your agenda **previews** the body of your message—usually in one sentence—and prepares the reader for the main points you're going to make.

## ARGUMENT

Your argument is the meat of your message. It includes your main points **supported by solid evidence and logic**. Keep in mind the Rule of Three and keep your argument simple and memorable by not exceeding three supporting points.

## ACTION

Business communication often ends with a **call to action**. Your closing should not only summarize but also identify next steps (if appropriate), letting your audience know what you'd like them to do based on the information you've shared.

# IN CONCLUSION

Don't leave your audience wandering hopelessly around in your message. Create an **outline** to organize and sequence your ideas. Use the **4A structure** to build your outline and guide the composition of your message:

- Capture your audience's **ATTENTION**

- Specify your **AGENDA**

- Craft a strong **ARGUMENT**

- Deliver your call to **ACTION**

# LEARN MORE

## ARTICLES

Gallo, Carmine. *"Thomas Jefferson, Steve Jobs, and the Rule of 3" Forbes.* https://www.forbes.com/sites/carminegallo/2012/07/02/thomas-jefferson-steve-jobs-and-the-rule-of-3/#3306fb541962, accessed October 2017.

## BOOKS

**Garner, Bryan A.** *HBR Guide to Better Business Writing.* **Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2012.**

**Lamb, Sandra E.** *Writing Well for Business Success.* **New York, NY: St. Martin's, 2015.**

Minto, Barbara. 2009. *The Pyramid Principle: Logic in Writing and Thinking (3rd edition).* Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Ltd.

## WEBSITES

**Purdue Online Writing Lab. "Types of Outlines and Samples." https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/544/03/, accessed February 2017.**

**Tony Buzan. "Home." http://www.tonybuzan.com/, accessed February 2017.**

## VIDEOS

MacGrercy Consultants. "How to Make a Mind Map." YouTube, published May 6, 2009. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLWV0XN7K1g, accessed February 2017.

**(Bold citations are referenced in the chapter text.)**