

## Essay Organization – Three Common Methods

by Susan Barber

Writing a timed essay for an AP exam is stressful for even the most confident of students. The job of an AP teacher (or any writing teacher honestly) is to provide as many tools as possible for the student to have in their writing toolbox. Having different methods of organization is fundamental because it provides the outline and structure for the analysis and ideas of the essay. Organizing can be challenging because there is no one “right” way to do this. Below are the three most common ways to organize a timed writing response with examples of sample essays from AP central.

**Insight** – Organizing by insight about a passage starts with a big picture idea, observation, or theme further unpacked with textual evidence and/or devices linked back to the meaning. The advantage of this method of organization is students almost always address the meaning of the work to some degree and focus heavily on analysis. Students need to be careful if using this method of organization to include how the author or poet develops the passage through poetic and/or literary devices. Examples of topic sentences from sample essays on AP Central organized by insight are below:

(2012 *Under the Feet of Jesus* – 2A scored an 8)

- “Initially a question is posed signifying to the reader that Estrella thirsts for knowledge and yearns for the discovery of knowing as much as possible.”
- “Selective additional details serves to further characterize Estrella as resilient . . . “ (While this sentence begins with “selection of detail” the focus of the sentence and paragraph is on an insight (Estrella being resilient)

(2016 *The Mayor of Casterbridge* – 2B scored a 6)

- “Hardy constantly focuses on the difference in Elizabeth,’s the daughter, behavior and Michael’s, the father, behavior.”
- “Due to Elizabeth’s constant shame from Michael’s criticism, Elizabeth is waged in a war between freedom, independence, and conformity in her behavior.”

**Order of the Passage**– Offering analysis, insight, and devices in the order in which they appear in the passage is another commonly used method of organization. The advantage of this method of organization is students are most likely to not leave out significant parts of a passage or have gaps in their thoughts since they are systematically working through the passage. Students need to be careful if using this method of organization to include big picture ideas and insights.

Examples of topic sentences from sample essays on AP Cenral organized by order are below:

(2016 *The Mayor of Casterbridge* – 2A scored a 9)

- “From the first sentence, the passage begins to set up a relationship between Henchard and Elizabeth-Jane as an unhealthy one.”
- “Yet these lengths are not enough for Henchard, who moves on to criticizing his daughter’s handwriting.”

(2007 *Johnny Got His Gun* – 2A scored an 8)

- “The opening paragraph of the passage sets the tone as peaceful yet important.”
- “Trumbo also illustrates the men’s love, respect, and thoughtfulness through letting the reader into the young man’s head in the second paragraph from the point of view of the young man.”

**Devices** – Organizing by device has paragraphs centered on a particular device with examples of the device from the text. This is the most formulaic of the methods rarely yielding an essay no higher than a 6 (but see an exception below) but works well for students who struggle with writing or analysis. Students need to be careful if using this method of organization to include how the device reinforces the big picture idea or insight. Examples of topic sentences from sample essays on AP Central organized by device are below:

(2016 “Juggler” – 1A scored a 9)

- “In the first and last stanzas, no alliteration beyond ‘daily dark’ appears evoking a tone that could hardly be described as cheerful.”
- “The speaker’s view of the world, as seen through their lens of the juggler, is also observable through the various diction choices made throughout the poem.”

(2007 *Johnny Got His Gun* – 2B scored a 6)

- “By telling the story from a third person point of view, Trumbo provides the reader with a more universal view of the father-son relationship.”
- “Through the use of simple syntax, Trumbo further characterizes the relationship of the father and son.”

### **Some thoughts and ideas for teaching organization:**

**Be sure to discuss the HOW of writing and not just the WHAT.** Many teachers focus so much on analysis and content, that students are not taught the art and craft of writing. Organizing falls into crafting an essay and needs to be discussed regularly.

**Study sample essays through the lens of organization.** AP Central provides years upon years of sample essays which can serve as mentor texts. Spend a lesson having students look at essays to see various methods of organization.

**Encourage students to experiment with different methods of organization.** Students may be stuck in a default mode when it comes to organizing an essay and need to be forced to try something outside of their comfort zone. Choose a prompt that lends itself well to a particular method of organization and have students write using that method. (Be sure not to penalize them with a bad grade if the experiment does not work).

**Spend time planning and organizing before writing.** This seems obvious, yet many students neglect to plan and jump straight into writing. Five minutes of giving thought to how an essay will be developed and outlining the essay will result in a far better essay than one without planning.