Finding an Organizing Scheme

From: Steven Pinker’s *The Sense of Style* (2014)

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The writer’s challenge

There is a major difference between organizing principles for sentences and for text.

- Rules of syntax offer limited possibilities.
  - E.g. object generally has to go after the verb

- There are more possibilities in organizing a text.
  - E.g. In an essay on mammals, it is up to you to write first about primates, then bats and so on, or first about primates, then whales, dolphins, etc.

- The challenge is to come up with a **scheme** to order the units of your text
Possible Approaches to Organization

• Writer may choose order arbitrarily, using verbal signposts or numbered headings to guide reader.

• But, in many writing genres, numbered headings are not an option, and excessive signposting can bore the reader.

➢ **IDEAL approach**: leave an intuitive trail, a *SCHEME* for stringing units into a natural order that *allows readers to anticipate* what they will encounter next
E.g. An essay explaining the literature on neurobiology and genetics of language

Vast range of topics that need to be organized:

- case studies of neurobiological patients
- computer simulations of neural networks
- neuroimaging of the brain areas that are active during language processing

First temptation is to order these studies historically (e.g. how textbooks do it), but this is indulgence in professional narcissism: readers are interested in the brain, NOT in the history of the doctors and professors studying the brain.

THUS, clearer SCHEME caters to the expectations of someone who wants to learn about the brain.

>> the essay could zoom in from bird’s eye view to increasingly microscopic components.
Essay’s *structural scheme* could be...

- From highest vantage point, you can make out *only brain’s two hemispheres*, so begin with studies of split-brain patients and other discoveries that locate language in left hemisphere.

- Zooming in *on left hemisphere*, one can see a big cleft dividing temporal lobe from rest of brain; territory on banks of cleft repeatedly turns up as crucial for language in studies of stroke patients and scans of intact subjects.

- Moving closer, one can see *various regions* (Broca, Wernicke, etc.) and discussion can turn to more specific language skills.
Source