

ACADEMIC ENGLISH ESSAY ORGANIZATION

Language represents thought.

Culture represents organized behaviors.

Written language represents culturally organized thought.

The building blocks for writing systems began very slowly around 12,000 years ago, but developed writing systems didn't really take off for another 8,000 years. Over time, however, what started as pictures on sealed pots that represented what they contained slowly turned into simple symbols for sounds, ideas and concepts - first in Iraq and Egypt, then China, and later Mesoamerica. There are even writing systems that are dead and which no one can yet translate.

Today there are still around 6,000 languages in the world, but only a dozen or so writing systems to record them. The major systems can be classified as logographic (record of an idea), syllabic (based on syllables), and alphabetic (based on phonemes). The last is what you are reading now. But as much as writing systems and languages differ, so do cultures, and language and culture are far from inseparable. The following excerpt from Cynthia Boardman's textbooks is based on Robert Kaplan's idea that cultural patterns of behavior are INTERTWINED with a culture's writing system and thus an expected or "preferred" pattern for organizing thought:

"English essay organization is fairly straightforward, and may reflect Europe's and America's history of industrialization and its focus on efficient use of time. In Academic English readers expect an article to have a beginning, middle, and an end. Additionally, there should be a clear idea about what the entire article will discuss in the beginning. The middle is where details and support are presented. The end is to put it all together and remind the reader of everything that was covered.

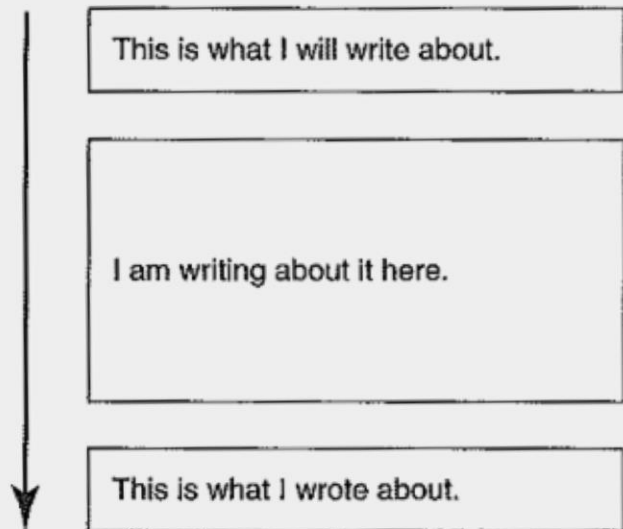


Diagram 1: English Organization

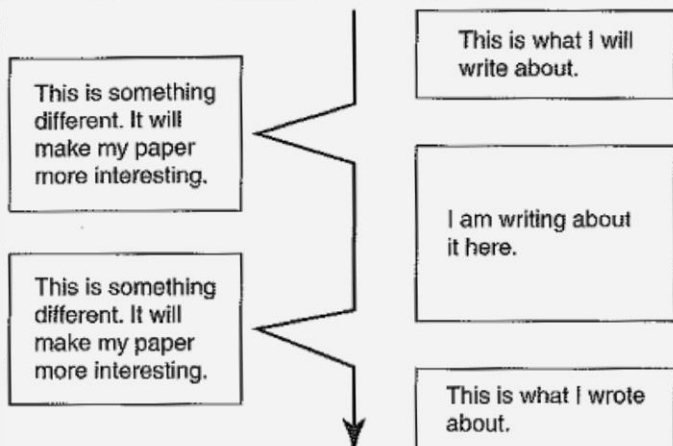


Diagram 2: Spanish Organization

Other languages organize writing differently. For example, Spanish organization is similar to English, but the line from beginning to end isn't so straight. Spanish speakers write about the topic, but here and there they add something that is not directly related to the topic. To a Spanish speaker, this makes the writing more interesting. Here is a diagram of the Spanish style of writing.



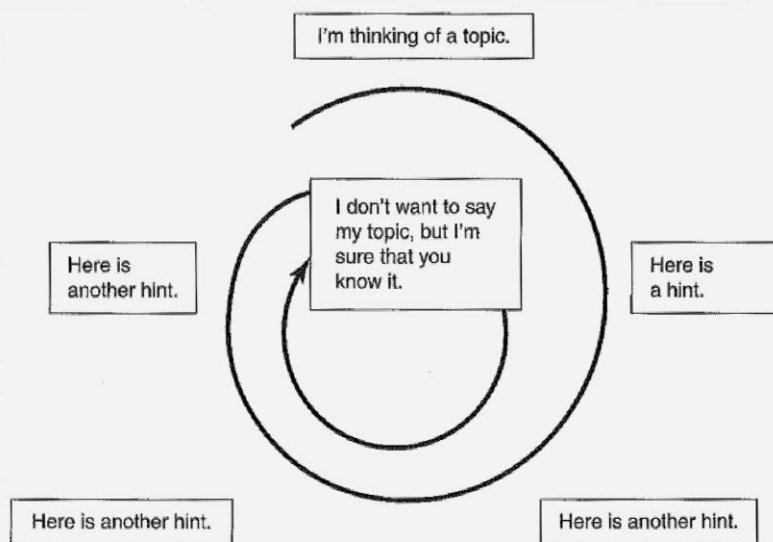


Diagram 3: Japanese Organization

Still another style of writing is used in Arabic. To be a good writer in Arabic, you need to write in a parallel style. This means that you write using coordinating conjunctions, such as *and*, *or*, or *but*. English, on the other hand, uses more subordinating conjunctions, such as *when*, *before*, or *until*. Arabic writing is also more repetitive than English writing. To an English reader, this coordination and repetition would be boring, but to an Arabic reader, this style is elegant and what is expected. Look at this diagram. It shows the repetition and coordination that is necessary for good Arabic writing." (6-7)

The Japanese style of writing is often circular. This means that the topic comes at the end of the article. In fact, sometimes, the writer doesn't say what the topic is. Instead, he gives hints to help the reader guess the topic. Here is a diagram of the Japanese style of writing.

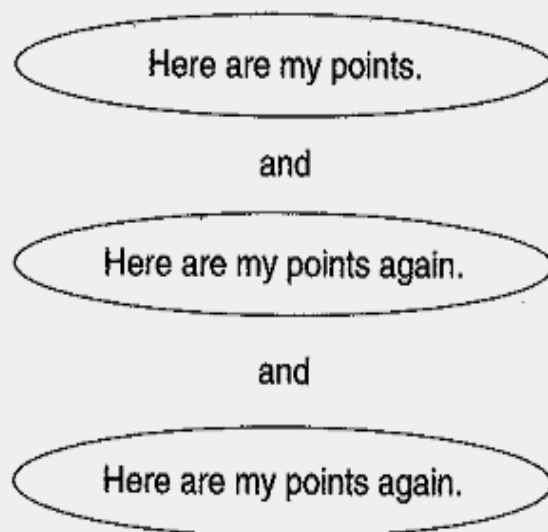
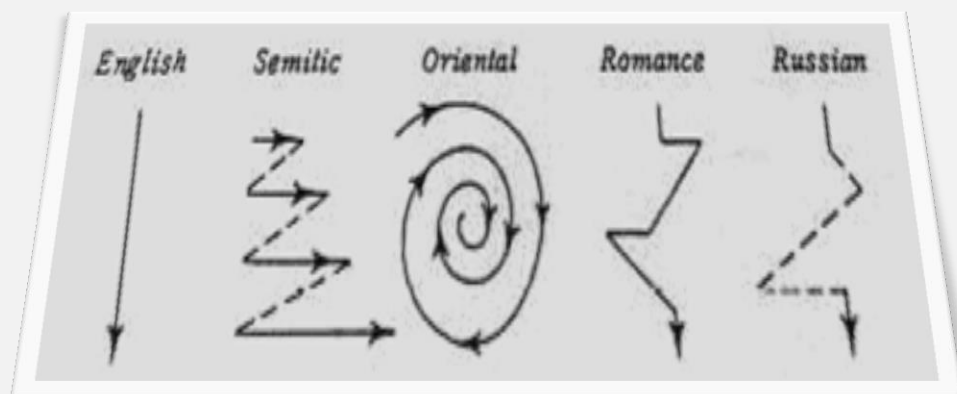


Diagram 4: Arabic Organization

Consider Kaplan's more simplified diagram before organizing your next essay.

Perhaps you see a resemblance to what you have read in English and your language, perhaps not.

Understand, however, that among those who study language and cultures closely, there is an overwhelming agreement that no language is better than another, no culture superior to another, only different.



A better culture is only a culture you understand better. Still, the rules of a writing style must be learned like the rules of a language. You are already bilingual; but to become a successful writer, you must also become bicultural, and that can only happen with practice, practice, and more practice.

1. Boardman, Cynthia A. *Writing to Communicate* 3. Pearson Longman. 2009. Print.
2. Kaplan, R.B. "Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education." *Language Learning*, 16(1), 1966. Print.