

TRAIT FOCUS: ORGANIZATION

Lesson Objective

Students freewrite organizational outlines centering on an “aha” moment.

A Moment of Discovery

The basic functions of effective organization in writing is to be clear and to hold the reader’s interest. The writing must, at the very least, serve the content and message. Beyond that, however, writing is also meant to affect the reader, be it to persuade, entertain, or inform. A masterful writer is one who is not only clear and interesting but also organizes his or her ideas in a way that has a profound impact on the audience.

For example, the moment the writer unveils a crucial piece of information is called an “aha moment.” Often occurring at the end of a piece, this is a moment of discovery for the reader. He or she realizes something important, something which the writer has subtly alluded to throughout but kept concealed. The writer has organized the text in a way that maximized the final effect.

The short story “The Gift of the Magi” by O. Henry is one famous example of the aha moment. Integrate the following Literature/Writing Connection lesson into your discussion of different organizational strategies your students can utilize in their writing.

Story Overview

Jim and Della have limited means and big hearts, and it is Christmastime. Jim’s prized possession is his gold pocket watch which belonged to his father and grandfather. Della’s is her long, beautiful hair.

Della wants nothing more than to give Jim an extraordinary gift. She sells her hair to buy him a platinum fob chain for his watch. Then she goes home to wait for Jim to arrive with his Christmas present for her. The story ends with a classic moral—the value of true love far outweighs that of physical possessions.

The Light Bulb Goes Off

1. As part of your instruction on using organizational strategies during prewriting, discuss the importance of clarity and holding the reader’s attention. Those should be the primary goals of any piece of writing.
2. An additional goal of writing is affect. This is the way the writing makes the reader think or feel after he or she is done. Writing can have great emotional impact on a reader. One way to achieve this is through the aha moment. This is a moment of discovery when the reader realizes something important or figures something out.
3. Discuss “The Gift of the Magi” as an example of an aha moment. It is a surprise at the end when the two reveal their gifts—combs for Della’s hair that has been cut off; a chain for Jim’s watch that has been sold. How does Henry achieve this emotional effect? [We do not see Jim’s POV.] How does the story’s organization make this aha moment possible? [Della’s shocking realization is also the reader’s.]
4. Allow your students 10 to 15 minutes to freewrite on the following writing prompt: *Write a short narrative about an aha moment in your life in which you realized something important or discovered something new. Be sure to include before, during, and after details to explain the importance of your discovery.*
5. Next, have your students devise an organizational outline for their writing. The first few points should be the before details, in which the writer sets the scene. The next point should be the during details, in which the writer experiences the aha moment. Finally, the last points should be the after details, in which the writer shows the impact of what he or she has learned.
6. Extend the lesson by having your students write out their organizational outline into a full narrative paper.