



Tip of the Month 02: The Lamborghini Rule

You are roaring across the desert in your new Lamborghini. (Okay, you're driving the speed limit in an eight-year-old Subaru wagon, but one can dream. The point will be the same.) You see a distant city silhouetted against a panorama of jagged brown mountains. As the interstate brings you closer, city blocks and individual buildings come into focus. As you enter the city, you see doors and windows, and the lettering on signs.

This stepwise movement from a broad view to a more detail-oriented understanding mirrors the organization of academic writing on three levels: the paper, the paragraph, and the sentence. Moving from broad to narrow is the essence of logical flow.

The introduction to a paper should establish its boundaries: the who, what, when, where, and why of the subject, or any other relevant parameters. The panorama—but not the whole wide world. Note: the why is particularly important in academic writing; it's the principle or question being examined. The paper should then be organized by section (if complex enough) and paragraph. The blocks and buildings. Organization can be a puzzle. How should content be subdivided to produce a coherent logical flow while minimizing repetition? Solve this puzzle in outline form before beginning to write sentences!

As every building must have a geometric arrangement of doors and windows, each paragraph must have an orderly structure. A reasonable approach is to build each paragraph with a topic sentence (the main idea of the paragraph), supporting facts and evidence (sequenced from broad to narrow), and analysis (moving from principles to their application). We should be able to extract the argument by reading the opening paragraph and all the topic sentences.

As windows and doors are fitted into the grander scheme of a building's floors, sentences, too, benefit from the broad to narrow approach. As readers, our overworked memories require the purpose of the sentence before the details. For example, it's difficult to read a list before knowing its purpose. Bad: "The hull, the flight deck, the superstructure, etc., are the major components of an aircraft carrier." This forces us to reread the sentence and put the elements in context, especially as the sentence gets longer and more complicated. Better: "The major components of an aircraft carrier are the hull, etc."