

ORGANIZING PAPERS: CREATING MAPS OF THE TERRITORY

This handout is addressed to writers who frequently find themselves frustrated by the difficulty they have in writing well-organized papers. However, it is also designed for writers who can and do compose organized texts, but who wish they had less stressful and/or less time-consuming methods for reaching this goal. In the pages that follow I will not only be offering you ways to represent the shape of a paper for yourself, but, at the same time, I will show you how developing such maps of the territory is an excellent device for finding patterns in your thinking about a topic.

We will be covering the step in the writing process that traditionally has been labeled "outlining." You'll notice that I prefer, instead, to talk about "creating maps of the territory," and I prefer this phrase for two reasons. First of all, the word "outline" is a very negative one for some writers, either because they were forced to do outlines in school even though they found no use for them, or because they never did such outlines "right." The term "maps" helps us avoid negative attitudes we might associate with "outlines." But I prefer "maps" also because it gives a much clearer sense of the nature and purpose of this step in the writing process, and also because "map" really is more descriptive of the various forms this writer's tool can take.

We'll begin our discussion of organizing papers with the premise that it is not possible to write a well-organized paper without a map. Before you reject this premise, give it a little thought. Without some sort of guide, how does a writer know *where* she is going to put particular information? Without some sort of guide, how does she determine the *order* in which she'll introduce various ideas? Without some sort of guide, how does she know what she's going to say in a particular paragraph? In other words, well-organized papers don't just happen. Readers judge them to be well-organized because the writer has imposed an order on his material before he completed the final draft of his paper.

Of course, the guide or map a writer uses doesn't have to be written down. It is quite possible for writers to develop—and keep—such maps in their memories. But there are drawbacks to these mental maps. They work only if writers don't forget the map of a particular paper before the paper is finished. Moreover, if the idea is complex, trying to work out its map mentally can tie the writer's brain into knots. Creating a map on paper avoids these pitfalls. Developing a map also has a number of other benefits that will become obvious as we go along. SO—assuming that the maps we will be discussing will be worked out on paper, let's consider the function of a map. It is a tool for writers, a tool that serves two important purposes:

- Making a map is a strategy writers use to organize their thinking into a meaningful pattern or picture.
- Once developed, a map becomes a plan or guide writers follow as they compose and revise their papers. This map works for writers the same way road maps work for travelers. As a writer composes specific paragraphs and sentences, her map reminds her what territory she has already covered in the paper, what material she will cover later, and, therefore, where she ought to be now. With a map, a writer never feels lost or disoriented.

Let's get into specifics by considering this second function of the map first.

THE FORMS AND FEATURES OF A MAP

The best way to understand the way a map helps writers is to recognize that we can look at a paper both as a temporal and a spatial phenomenon.

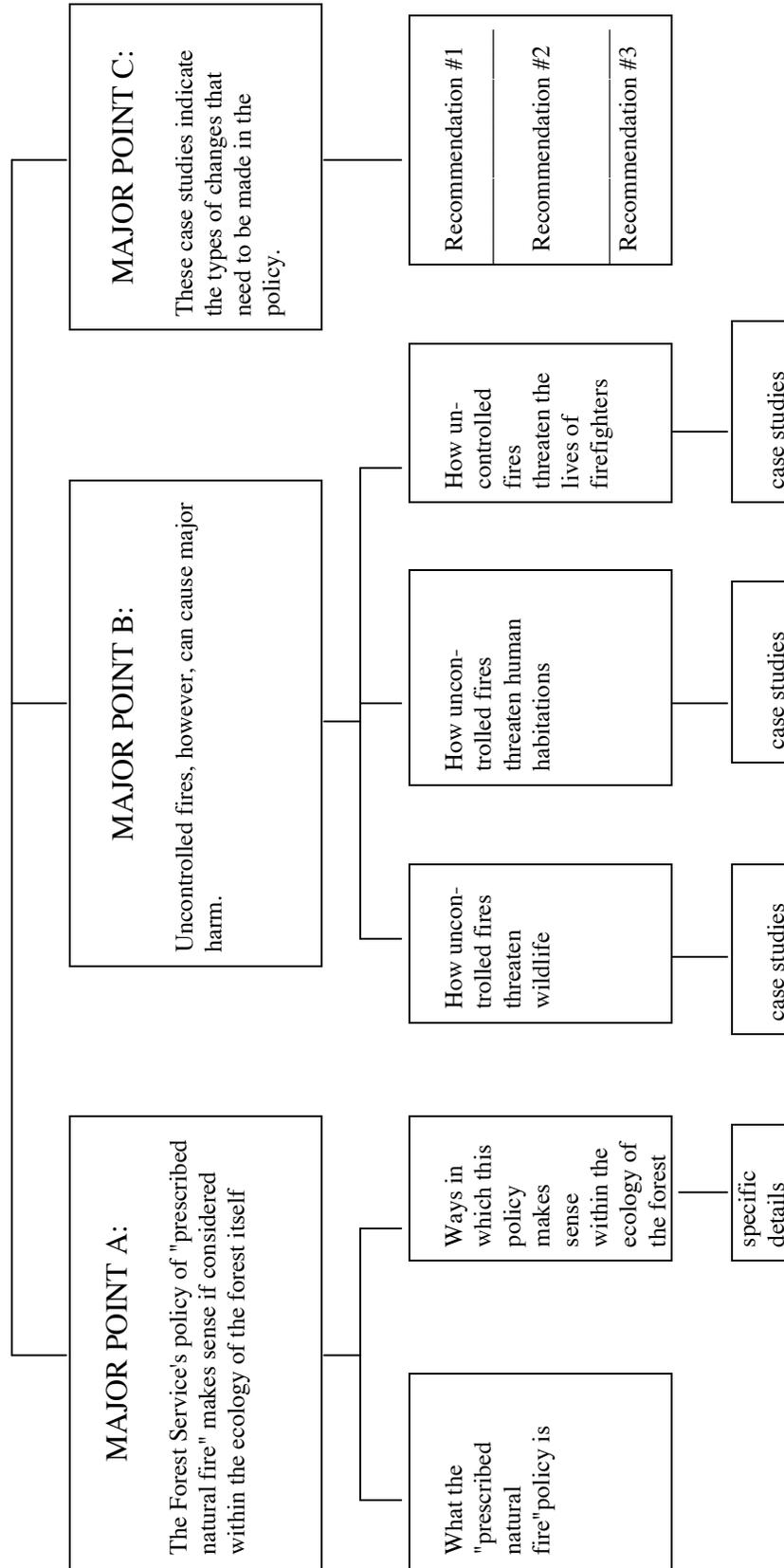
The act of composing a paper—and reading one—is temporal and linear. We must write one word before we can write another. We compose one sentence before we can compose another, one paragraph before another, and so on. Similarly, the act of reading is temporal and linear: readers can read only one sentence at a time, and they normally progress from the top of the page to the bottom, from page 1 to page 2 and so on. However, even though the acts of reading and writing are temporal and linear, what happens in readers' minds ought to be spatial. A well-organized paper enables readers to build a picture of one, coherent idea as they read, and they are able to do so because the writer was working from a model of one, coherent idea. This model was her map, and its major value to the writer is that it enables her to see at a glance the shape of the whole paper. Without developing such maps, writers can neglect to build such a picture for themselves. Without such maps, writers risk getting lost in their sentences and paragraphs. It is all too easy, when we are writing, to forget the point we intended to make, or to go off on a tangent, or to neglect to include important evidence or ideas. With a map in front of us—with the picture of the whole paper before us—we not only avoid such risks, but we are much better able to express what we wanted to say clearly and fully. Writers, then, use a map to determine:

- what they will say
- where they will say it
- why they are saying what they are saying

As long as a map meets these criteria, it can be represented in any number of ways, as the maps on the following pages illustrate. The smart thing to do is to develop a map in a form that you find most comfortable and most meaningful. After all, the only reason writers create maps is to make writing a bit easier for themselves. If your map is not in a form that you find useful, why bother?

SAMPLE MAP 1

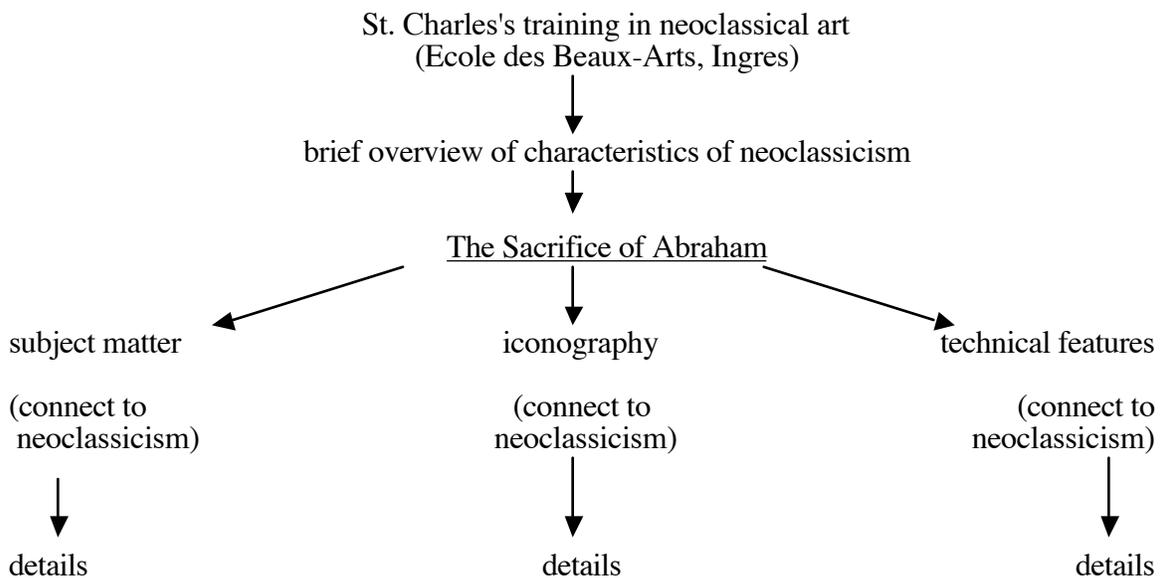
THESIS: Although the Forest Service's policy of "prescribed natural fire" makes sense if considered within the ecology of the forest itself, this policy needs to be modified to recognize that uncontrolled fires can cause major harm to wildlife, to human habitations, and to firefighters themselves.



Notice that this grid is formed by sets of boxes that are parallel horizontally. Material in boxes that are parallel need to be the same level of generalization and the same level of importance in the argument .

SAMPLE MAP 2

THESIS: St. Charles's painting The Sacrifice of Abraham is an excellent example of French neoclassical art.



SAMPLE MAP 3

THESIS: Emma Bovary's suicide can be understood if we realize that Emma was trapped; she could not act the way a woman was expected to act in nineteenth-century middle-class France, nor was she allowed to express the "masculine side" of her nature.

- I. In nineteenth-century France, middle-class women were expected to stay at home, care for their husbands and children, and otherwise be docile and submissive.
- II. Emma was not content simply to stay at home and care for her husband.
- III. Like men in her society, Emma wanted to be free to act upon her desires.
 - A. Men in Emma's society were free to act upon their desires.
 - B. Like the men in her society, Emma took lovers.
- IV. Because she was a woman, Emma was condemned for acting upon her desires and flouting the social code of fidelity.
- V. Since she could not act as a woman was expected to act and since she was not allowed to express the masculine side of her nature, Emma decided that suicide was her only option.

This outline, obviously, presents only the skeleton of the argument. Writers usually find it helpful to fill in each segment of the outline with more details about what they will say there.

The advantages of having a map of a paper are pretty obvious. Writers can compose their papers at their leisure, writing one part tonight, another part tomorrow. Since they don't need to keep in memory the organization they planned for the paper, they don't even have to write the paper in its normal linear order; they can write the easy parts first, and then tackle the hard parts. When they have questions—about where a particular piece of information should go, or whether that information even belongs in the paper—the map is there to enable them to answer these questions. Moreover, if certain sections need an extra draft or two, the writer doesn't have to fret about how this reworking will affect the paper as a whole; he can see this with a glance at his map.

But there is another advantage to creating a map, and that advantage is nicely captured by Linda Flower when she tells us that ". . . a good plan needs to be detailed enough to test, but *cheap enough to throw away*."¹ It's possible, of course, to find a shape for a paper by writing the paper, but sketching out a map is so much "cheaper." Sketching out a map takes much less time than composing a draft, and we don't risk the "possessiveness" we can develop about sentences and paragraphs that we've spent a lot of time composing. It's very difficult to persuade ourselves to do a major revision when we've invested hours in the text we have—even if we know this draft is shapeless and disorganized. Moreover, by using a map we give ourselves the opportunity to consider various possible patterns for the paper—and the opportunity to test the logic or workability of a pattern that seems to be promising. These advantages of using maps take us right into the other major function of maps, helping us to give shape and order to our thinking and our ideas.

DEVELOPING A MAP HELPS YOU THINK CRITICALLY

Unfortunately, creating a map and following it as we compose a paper are not themselves guarantees that the paper will be a good one. Thus we need to consider in more detail exactly what a map should represent. Most college instructors assume that good papers will

- be focused on one central idea, an insight or conclusion the student has developed about the subject matter;
- explain the logic or line of reasoning the student used to reach this conclusion or insight.

In other words, college instructors assume that students will **THINK** about—examine, analyze, reflect on—the subject or topic they've been asked to write about. If we visualize a paper as a building, then the building is the writer's idea and the blueprint of that building is the writer's map. A map, therefore, is a blue-print or representation of an individual's thinking.

Different kinds of papers—reports on experiments or studies, book reviews, reviews of the literature, for example—invite specific types of thinking about a subject. Some have built into them a specific pattern of organization. But the most typical kind of paper assigned is a critical or analytical paper. Very generally speaking, the most common pattern for this paper is an introduction that ends with a thesis statement, and a body that explains/develops in detail the line of reasoning the author used to reach that conclusion. A thesis statement is a statement in which the author makes a claim or an assertion about a topic:

¹ Linda Flower, *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing*, 2d ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 69.

Paris Is Burning is a powerful film both in the view it gives us of a gay subculture and in the light it sheds on dominant American values.

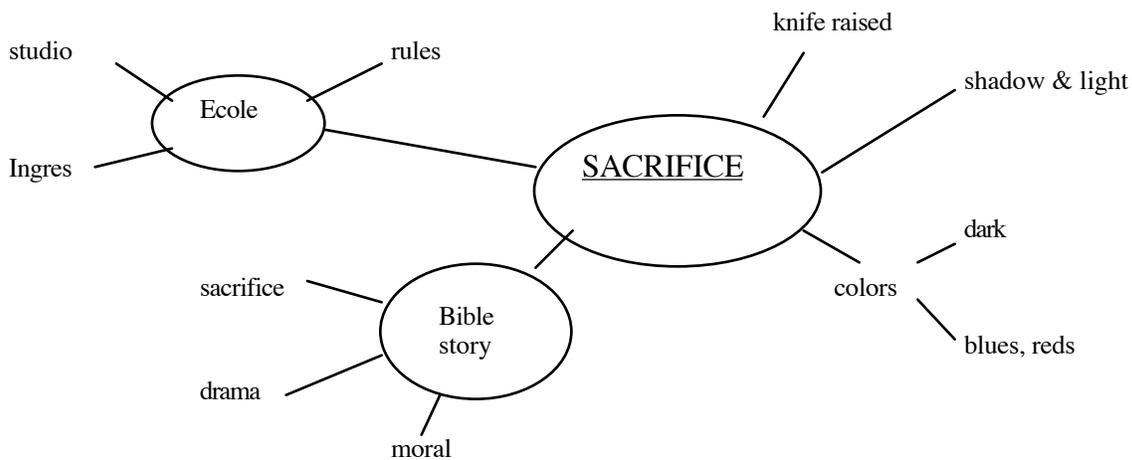
The power of the military in Outer Slobovia has been the greatest obstacle to the development of a democratic government in that country.

The hard work of writing papers, then, is the intellectual challenge of thinking our way through to an insight or conclusion. Our time and mental energy ought to be spent on these tasks, on making sense of the topic, deciding what it means to us. Mapping techniques offer us a quick and dirty method of going through this thinking process on paper. As we consider ways to use mapping techniques to achieve this end, we'll also be considering the basic elements of critical thinking.

EXPLORE POSSIBILITIES

In the early stages of the thinking/writing process, we want to give ourselves the opportunity of exploring possibilities, of laying out all the parts of the intellectual puzzle and trying out various ways of putting them together, so that we can decide which configuration makes the most sense. We are brainstorming at this stage, and there are a variety of strategies we can use:

- consulting entries we've already made in journals or reading logs we are keeping for a course;
- various types of freewriting;
- talking out ideas with a friend (this method works best if the friend plays the role of active listener and if at least one of you is taking good notes of what you are saying);
- writing out the ideas in webs.



DON'T attempt to organize yet. That process comes later. Right now your task is to get as much as possible out of your brain and onto paper. Nothing is too big, too small, too obvious, or too irrelevant to put down on paper at this stage.

An alternative to creating a web would be to create a grid or "chart." This approach works nicely if you are doing a comparison/contrast, or if there are particular elements or aspects of a topic that you want to examine.

neoclassical style

composition	
line	
color	
iconography	

	Japan	China
political system		
economic system		
social structures		

In creating your grid, use appropriate parallel categories to create columns and rows. Be sure that the boxes you form inside the grid are large enough to allow you to write in lots of points and specifics.

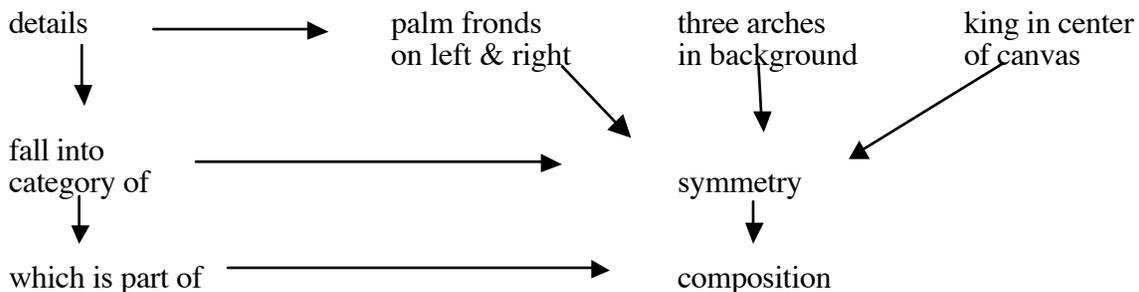
Once you've created your grid, you can "fill in the blanks" over a series of work sessions, giving you time in between to do more reading, to do any research required—and to think more about the topic!

LOOK FOR PATTERNS AND CONNECTIONS

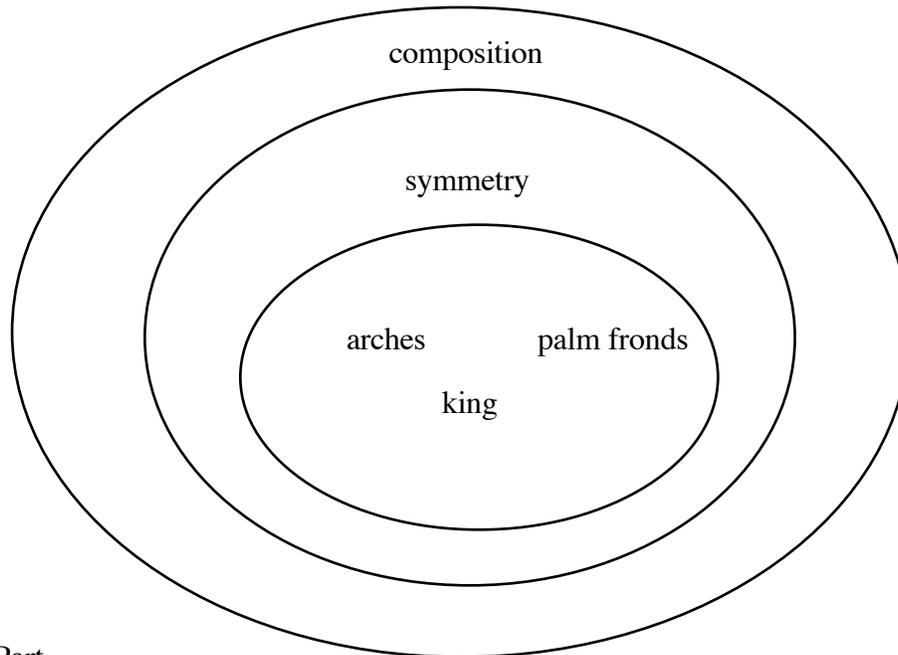
When you've gone through several of these brainstorming sessions, you are ready to start looking for patterns and connections. Two types of connections are especially relevant.

One type of pattern or connection you'll probably find will be parts and wholes. In other words, you will begin to see that certain details or specifics can be categorized under specific labels—or, conversely, that more general ideas can be broken down into more specific parts.

Parts to Whole

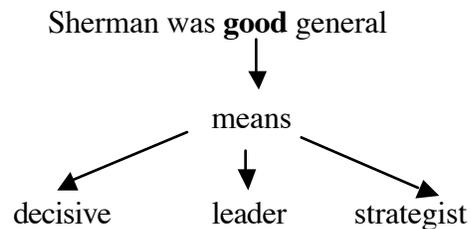


These relationships could also be represented this way:



Whole to Part

As well as building from concrete details to categories into which they fit, you should also break more abstract code words or sentences down into more specific parts:



Logical Connections

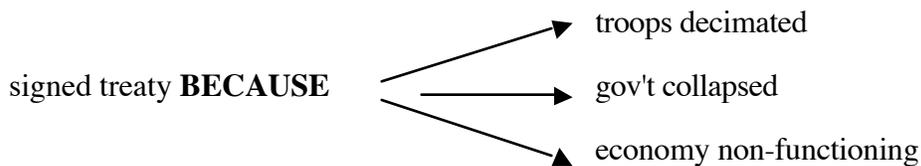
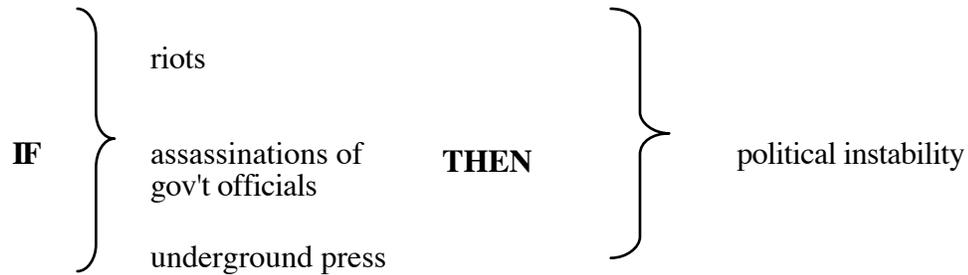
In addition to looking for patterns of whole and part, you should also be looking for logical connections:

SIMILARITIES

fertility gods
 marriage rituals

DIFFERENCES

political structures
 language



Remember that the purpose of looking for patterns and connections is to analyze the topic—to determine what it is and therefore what it means. Some patterns will immediately jump out at you, but in other cases you may need to find them by asking yourself questions: what do I mean by this? The journalist's list is also helpful: who? what? where? when? why? how? Don't take anything for granted; express on paper all the relationships you see. Remember, too, that when you create patterns or connections, you must have a **GOOD REASON** for doing so, and you need to have that reason expressed on paper, whether in a visual or verbal form. When it comes to writing the paper, you will have to give these reasons to your readers.

Use any and all verbal or visual techniques that let you see patterns quickly and easily. Folks sensitive to color, for example, may want to use colored pens or highlighters to mark connections; others may want to write out relevant ideas on note cards, and look for patterns by moving the cards around.

TEST POSSIBLE MAPS

Once you've started to make connections between pieces of the puzzle, a larger pattern or picture ought to begin to emerge. When it does, sketch out a quick map of it, or draft a possible thesis statement, or do both. Before you come to a final decision about the thesis and the map for your paper, you want to keep your options open and test the patterns. You are looking for the one that seems **MOST RIGHT TO YOU**. Another way to put it: your objective is to **SEE** one, organic picture in which you **KNOW** how the parts fit together.

You won't be ready to write the final draft of a paper, or do final revisions of drafts you've written, until and unless these conditions are fulfilled:

- The map and the thesis statement must fit perfectly together. The thesis must cover **everything** on your map, but it must **not** imply anything that isn't included on the map.
- The map must include ALL the ideas and evidence you intend to cover in your paper.
- The map must add up to a coherent, organic whole. You must KNOW how the pieces fit together (remember: the body of the paper is the explanation of your line of reasoning). If you have a piece that you want to include in your paper but it doesn't seem to fit naturally into the map you have, you'll either have to leave it out, or modify your map so that it does have a logical place.

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING THE COHERENCE OF YOUR PAPER

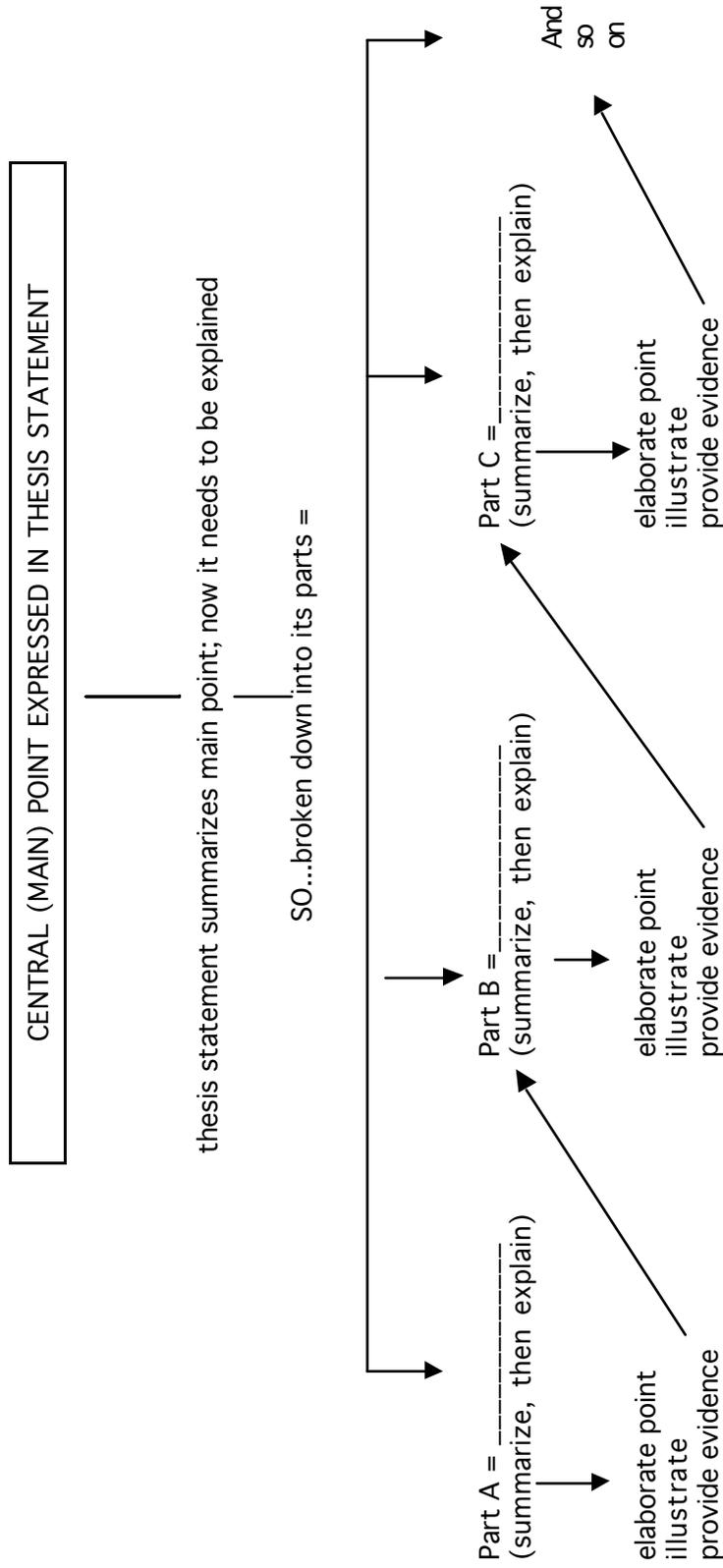
Once you are satisfied that you have a map that shows you very clearly the shape of your idea, you will need to consider once again the temporal, linear nature of reading and writing. The challenge you face now is breaking this complex, interrelated whole down into segments or parts, each of which you will develop before moving on to the next. Thus, in developing the final version of your map, you need to consider:

- the sequence of your central points
- the hierarchy of your ideas

HIERARCHIES

If you take a look at the general picture of a critical paper that appears on the next page, you will see that arguments are normally composed of a series of generalizations or central points, each of which is then developed through explanation, illustration, evidence. Your map must in some way reflect this hierarchical order. Hierarchy here means two things. First, that the paper follows a pattern of general-to-specific-to-general. The second is that the central parts of the paper/idea must be of equal importance, even though, when you write, some may take more space to develop than others.

OUTLINE/MAP
The Picture of Your Paper



If each of the major points on your map is a major part of the idea summarized in the thesis statement, then we would expect this fact to be reflected in language. Thus, a technique you can use to further assure yourself of the coherence of the paper is to express these major points by repeating key words or phrases from the thesis statement, connecting these words or phrases to the point you'll be developing in this segment of your paper. Boldfaced words are repeated from the thesis.

THESIS:

St. Charles's painting The Sacrifice of Abraham is an excellent example of French neoclassical art.

POINTS ON THE MAP:

- I. **St. Charles** was trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, where the principles of **neoclassicism** reigned.
- IV. In choosing as his subject matter for **The Sacrifice of Abraham** a dramatic scene from the Bible, **St. Charles** was following one of the central precepts of **French neoclassicism**.

THESIS:

Emma Bovary's suicide can be understood if we realize that Emma was trapped; she could not act the way a woman was expected to act in nineteenth-century middle-class France, nor was she allowed to express the "masculine side" of her nature.

POINTS ON THE MAP:

- I. **In nineteenth-century France, middle-class women were expected** to stay home, care for their husbands and children, and otherwise be docile and submissive.
- III. **Like men** in her society, **Emma** wanted to be free to act upon her desires.

("men" here picks up the "masculine" in the thesis)

SEQUENCING YOUR IDEAS

Notice that none of the maps we've looked at include entries labeled "background information." As a label, "background information" is meaningless; it does not tell you what information belongs here, nor, more importantly, how that information relates to your thesis. Moreover, your readers expect you to start right in on your argument. If you look again at the examples above, you will notice that what the first point in an argument normally does is to orient readers to central concepts around which the argument revolves. In the Madame Bovary paper, the writer first establishes what was expected of middle-class women in nineteenth-century France; this information clearly needs to come first, since the remainder of the paper will be contrasting Emma's behavior with this norm. The first point in the argument about St. Charles's Sacrifice of Abraham begins in what seems to be a temporal fashion. However, by beginning with St. Charles's student years, the writer is not just beginning at the beginning of the artist's life; rather, she is establishing two points central to the main argument: she's letting us know that neoclassicism was a formative part of St. Charles's development as an artist; and she's telling us

about central characteristics of French neoclassicism, information we need to fully comprehend the remainder of the paper.

In some papers, a way to order your ideas will seem obvious to you from the pictures you've drawn. In other papers, a sequence may not immediately suggest itself. While there are no absolute rules about sequencing ideas in a paper, here are some guidelines that can help you make your choices:

- The paper ought to build toward your main emphasis. Thus, if you have several arguments for your central point, it makes sense to present the strongest one last.
- If the readers' understanding of point Y is dependent on their understanding of point X, it makes sense to present X first. Similarly, if part or all of your argument follows a cause-effect pattern, establish the effect first (what has resulted), then go back to develop the causes.
- If your analysis revolves around a comparison/contrast, first of all remember that comparison/contrast is a means to an end, not an end in itself. That is, it is a method of analysis designed to give you a better understanding of the two topics being compared. Thus, the organization of your final paper will be determined by the insights or conclusion you arrive at from having gone through this analysis.

If you decide to focus your paper on similarities and differences, decide which you want to stress, and present that aspect last. Thus, if you want to stress differences, talk first about similarities, and then go to differences. Another way to determine the pattern you want for your paper revolves around the categories you've used for making comparisons. If you are comparing Hoti and Banbu, for example,

you can organize the paper around the categories of comparison (pattern 1):

- A. Religion
 1. Hoti
 2. Banbu
- B. Political Organization
 1. Hoti
 2. Banbu

Or you can deal with all aspects of Hoti, then all aspects of Banbu (pattern 2):

- A. Hoti
 1. religion
 2. political organization
- B. Banbu
 1. religion
 2. political organization

Generally speaking, pattern 2 (all X, then all Y) works best either when you see X and Y as VERY different from each other, or when the categories of comparison (religion, political organization) interconnect with each other in very different ways. Pattern 1 works best when the two objects of comparison seem similar, but you want to highlight subtle but definite differences. Regardless of the pattern you choose, keep the units in the paper parallel (in pattern 1, notice how the Hoti are always discussed first, then the Banbu; in pattern 2, notice that religion always comes first, followed by political organization). This repetition of pattern in your map (and thus in your paper) will help you and your readers keep track of what you are doing.

- Last, but certainly not least, remember that all this effort you've expended to develop a shape for your thinking will go for naught if your readers are not able to see the pattern of your thinking as they read. You, therefore, are responsible for explicitly and unambiguously expressing the relationships you see. This is what transitions are all about:

A third reason this military conflict was not called a war is that...

Although, as we have just seen, there are similarities between Hoti and Banbu, their differences are more striking.

The neoclassicism of The Sacrifice of Abraham can also be seen in its iconography.