After you have brainstormed, it is necessary to place your ideas into categories and to select an arrangement for these categories. As with every aspect of the writing process, the method of organizing and the type of outline vary depending on individual preferences as informed by the assignment and the discipline.

If ideas are introduced randomly or are placed under weakly defined categories, the thesis will not be supported effectively. In order to write a convincing argument, proposal, character or plot analysis, or research report, the categories under which you present your evidence need to be well-balanced and precisely articulated. The process of crafting categories for discussion can be time consuming but invaluable in the development of a strong paper.

In some fields, the overall organization of the paper is dictated by certain conventions. A research article in management, for example, generally proceeds with an abstract followed by the introduction, literature review, methods, results, discussion, and conclusion. A science lab report uses IMRaD—Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion. These types of writing often use headings to define the sections and dictate the general flow of ideas. However, within this form you will need to develop your points in an arrangement that will, depending on the discipline and the assignment, convince your audience, illustrate your process, or demonstrate understanding.

To create the best categories to use in delivering your information, first determine the characteristics of the items under discussion. In the prewriting stage you may have created a list of these characteristics. For example, if my assignment is to compare and contrast the writing style of two short stories, I would begin with a prewriting activity that explores the narrative techniques employed by each writer. Then, in the planning stage, I would search for patterns among these characteristics. For example, I might have noted that Author A infuses his work with descriptions using black and white. Author B also incorporates the colours black and white. Colour, then, might a useful category for discussion. After establishing several of these categories, I would explore the relationships the categories have to each other and how they contribute to the work as a whole. For example, I might determine that these colours, along with other symbolic elements, occur when the authors are addressing the characters’ moral choices. In the process of creating categories, then, we

1. Determine the characteristics of the subject;
2. Search for patterns among these characteristics;
3. Explore how these patterns relate;
4. Determine what these patterns mean.

Once you have established your categories, determined how they relate to each other, and assessed what these categories reveal, you must select the best organizational strategy. A well chosen strategy leads the reader through the paper in such a way that the reader leaves informed by your analysis or convinced by your
argument. As noted above, papers in some disciplines conform to certain established standards. Some of your writing in university will reflect these forms. Other writings, generally essays, as opposed to reports, will require you to develop the organizational strategy.

This strategy should evolve logically from the assignment and from the categories you have developed. An assignment asking you to trace the development of the Internet, may logically proceed chronologically. An assignment in which you are asked to determine changes in the music industry as a result of the Internet, may have a cause and effect format. Other assignments do not easily lend themselves to any particular strategy, and you will have to determine the most effective order of points. Often writers choose to leave the reader with the most powerful point and place the strongest point last, but because the essay must also begin well the second strongest point follows the introduction. In other cases a move from weakest to strongest point is the most desirable. One of the most difficult strategies to master, even for advanced writers, is comparison/contrast paper. Inexperienced writers often try to address first Subject A and then Subject B and conclude with an analysis that pulls the two together. The comparison, however, is often more effectively drawn by organization of points of comparison rather than by subject.

The key to organization is strategy. You should be able to explain why the organization you have chosen is the most effective choice. The form you choose should reflect the assignment and convey your ideas as powerfully as possible.

Now that you have developed your categories for discussion and selected your strategy, it is time to begin writing.