Essay Structuring Patterns

1. Alternating method: Point-by-point pattern

In the alternating method, you find related points common to your central subjects A and B, and alternate between A and B on the basis of these points (ABABAB ...).

For instance, a comparative essay on the French and Russian revolutions might examine how both revolutions either encouraged or thwarted innovation in terms of new technology, military strategy, and the administrative system.

The French and Russian revolutions (A and B) may be dissimilar rather than similar in the way they affected innovation in any of the three areas of technology, military strategy, and administration. To use the alternating method, you just need to have something noteworthy to say about both A and B in each area. Finally, you may certainly include more than three pairs of alternating points.

When do I use the alternating method?

Professors often like the alternating system because it tends to produce a more tightly integrated and analytical paper. Consider the alternating method if you are able to identify clearly related points between A and B.

2. Block method: Subject-by-subject pattern

In the block method (AB), you discuss all of A, then all of B.

Let’s apply the block method to the comparison between the French and Russian revolutions:

A Paragraphs 1–3 in body How the French Revolution encouraged or thwarted innovation
B Paragraphs 4–6 in body How the Russian Revolution encouraged or thwarted innovation

If you use the block method, do not append two disconnected essays to an introductory thesis. The B block, or second half of your essay, should refer to the A block, or first half, and make clear points of comparison whenever comparisons are relevant. (“Unlike A, B . . .” or “Like A, B . . .”)

When do I use the block method?

- You are unable to find points about A and B that are closely related to each other.
- Your ideas about B build upon or extend your ideas about A.
- You are comparing three or more subjects as opposed to the traditional two.

Adapted from The Comparative Essay, by V. Visvis and J. Plotnick, for The University of Toronto’s Writing Lab.