There is no one “right” way to organize a thesis or dissertation. There may be a common or preferred way in a given department, discipline, or specialty. But there is no ONE way. This is part of what makes writing a dissertation challenging; you cannot simply follow a set of plans someone has given you. Another challenging aspect of organizing a thesis or dissertation is that there are layers of organization. The overall project has an organization, each chapter has an organization, and you have to organize your ideas within and between paragraphs.

**Organizing Logic**
You have to decide how the project will develop an argument and how individual chapters function within that argument. You might employ an overall chronological structure, each chapter moving through different periods of time related to your particular area of research, building to your own work. Or, the organizing logic might be a narrative, in which each chapter adds to an overall “story” you are constructing about your topic and research. Or, you might create an argumentative structure, where each chapter functions as one element, much like the paragraphs in a much shorter argument essay (introduction, main point 1, main point 2, rebuttal, conclusion). Again, there is no ONE organizing logic that works for all projects across all disciplines; you should talk with your advisor early and often about what logic fits your project.

**Internal Organization**
Chapters also need organization within them. It matters both that you carefully organize your ideas and that you help readers understand and follow that organization. Here are a few key way writers organize within chapters.

**Signposting**
Like hikers out on a trail, readers of your thesis or dissertation will appreciate—and need—some signposts so that they know what is coming in a chapter, in a section, and even in a paragraph.

Examples: In this chapter I will...
The next section describes...
What follows in this paragraph is...

Signposts also help readers understand and remember what they just read, and they give you a way to move into another section or preview what will come in a later chapter.

Examples: In this chapter I...
The previous section described...*

*there are much more sophisticated signposts, these are just examples!

**Section Headings**
Like signposts, section headings help readers know what they should expect and they also help break up long sections of text so that readers can hold onto ideas and avoid confusion.
Writers often make the mistake of choosing section headings that only name the section, like Conclusion or Discussion. If that is the standard in your field, fine. If not, somewhat longer or more creative section headings may better serve readers (you know, the people determining if you graduate, or if this gets published). In some disciplines it is also possible (or required) for section headings to be numbered. Other disciplines use levels of headings, distinguished by typeface and/or level of indentation. Example:

**Major Section Heading**

*Subheading Level One*

Browse a finished thesis or dissertation in your discipline to see these levels.

**Transitions**

We use words, phrases, or sentences designed to help readers move from one idea to the next within a paragraph or from one paragraph to the next. When most people think about transitions, they think about words and phrases like however, after all, for example, therefore, at the same time, etc.

However, people do not often think about sentence structures themselves as transitions. Writers can structure sentences so that there is no need for a transitional word or phrase. One strategy is to use key phrases or terms from a previous sentence (or paragraph). Example:

(end of a paragraph) Those people, I fear, walk away from higher education, not because they find viable alternatives for vocational and professional training, but because they can no longer bear the continued assault on their sense of character and ability.

(beginning the next paragraph) Such violence goes on and accumulates its effect in an environment where it’s not contested and challenged.¹

Notice how the writer draws on “continued assault” from the previous sentence and uses “violence” as a transitional tool, violence being a close substitute for assault.

**Visual Elements**

Another way writers help readers is by including visual elements—graphs, tables, equations, etc. When you include these, make sure to follow all the formatting standards in your discipline. Also make sure to discuss the visual element in the body of your writing. If you don’t, you will confuse or frustrate readers.

Other possible visual elements include concept maps, tree structures, or mind maps. Each of these are visual representations of the relationship between ideas, and when writing a thesis or dissertation can be used to show specific concepts or to actually show readers the organizational structure of your project or chapters.

¹ Samples from Harry Denny’s *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-To-One Mentoring.*