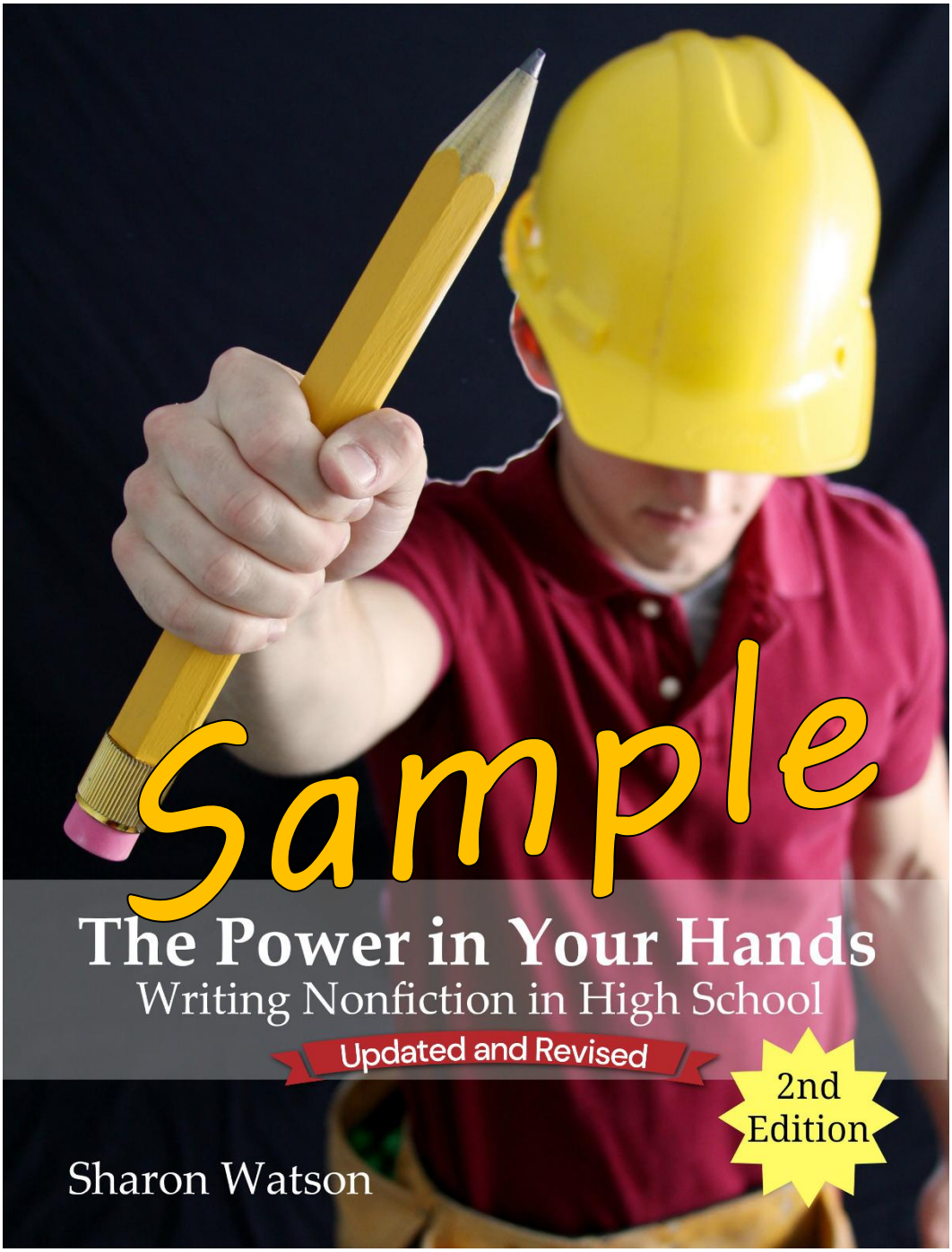

Writing with Sharon Watson

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The Power in Your Hands: Writing Nonfiction in High School, 2nd Edition, Updated and Revised

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Companion volume for this course:
The Power in Your Hands: Writing Nonfiction in High School, 2nd Edition, Teacher's Guide

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Table of Contents

Note: This Table of Contents shows the chapters and lessons in the complete textbook of *The Power in Your Hands*. This sample contains chapter 1 and parts of chapter 2.

Part 1: Before You Write

Note: The images in the paperback version of *The Power in Your Hands* are in grayscale. The images in the digital version are in color.

"I hate writing,
but I love having written."
-Dorothy Parker

Chapter 1: Thinking & Planning

Lesson 1

Some people say that writing is a mystery, that there are no rules, and that it is all subjective. You may be glad to know that those people are wrong.

Sure, what we *like* about the written word is subjective. Some readers enjoy fantasy or adventure novels while others prefer a thrilling article about last night's ball game or the latest scoop on fashions. But professional and school writing follow definite patterns and guidelines that are objective and measurable. Writers use specific tools to help them create newspaper articles, travel brochures, and riveting biographies. You can, too.

Learning to write is like learning to cook. The amateur cook learns to use the kitchen equipment, combine the ingredients, and follow a recipe. In the same way, writers learn how to use their tools (parallelism, the thesaurus, similes, cheesy analogies, the Fog Index, proofreading skills, and so forth); combine ingredients like introductions, topic sentences, various paragraph types, and conclusions; and follow the recipe of specific structures for each type of writing.

When you combine the methods and tools in this course with the skills you will develop from practicing them, you will be unbeatable. Or at least hard to catch up with.

You will learn how to correct your own work, too, using an objective set of criteria. In addition, because of all your practice, you will develop a gut instinct about the quality of your own writing.

WARNING: Cheesy analogy ahead. Proceed at your own risk.
And bring tortilla chips and maybe some salsa.

Your Writing Self

You might love the objectivity of writing reports; research and facts give you a thrill. Or maybe the challenge of creating an imaginative story excites you, but reports leave you baffled. This is perfectly normal. Not every student is good at every type of writing. It is a rare student that excels in both research papers and storytelling. Those are two separate writing skills and involve varying personalities and different areas of the brain.

Many things about writing are hard. Find out what makes writing a chore for you and in what circumstances it becomes easier. Understanding your writing self will help you strengthen your weaknesses and build your strengths.

Be aware of the conditions that help you write best. Why write early in the morning when you think best late at night?

Find your writing self in the following descriptions. Check all that apply to you:

❑ I like to write only about topics that are interesting to me.
❑ Writing stories is much more fun than writing reports and essays.
❑ I would rather walk across a burning desert at high noon with buzzards circling overhead while I drag a bone-dry water bottle than write anything whatsoever.
❑ It's hard for me to know how to begin and end my essays or reports.
❑ Writing is easier if it is very quiet around me.
❑ Research is interesting.
❑ I have trouble coming up with good ideas.
❑ Late at night is the best time to write.
❑ Writing by hand is pure torture, but writing at the keyboard is a little easier.
❑ It's hard to think of enough points or reasons for my assignments.
❑ When something interesting happens to me, I like to write it down.
❑ I like to try to change someone's mind with my writing.
❑ I have sloppy handwriting and/or bad spelling ~~scils~~ ~~skylls~~ skills.
❑ I can't find enough information to finish a paper.
❑ I write best when I'm with friends or listening to music.
❑ I don't care one way or the other about writing.
❑ The ideas are in my head, but I can't make them come out and sound right on paper.
❑ I make lists and like to take notes; they help me remember sermons and lectures.
❑ I have many ideas for writing, and I keep them in a notebook so I can use them later.
❑ I don't like to research. It's tedious.
❑ If I'm not interested in the topic, I have trouble doing the assignment.
❑ I need a lot of time to think about the assignment before I begin to write.
❑ Finding a topic I'm interested in is hard.

❑ Forget everything else—let me write stories.

❑ I would like to know how to write better.

❑ You gotta be kidding. Checking this box is enough writing for me for one day.

❑ Feeling the pencil or pen on the paper helps me write better.

❑ I like playing with words and finding just the right one.

❑ I don't mind writing essays and reports, but I have trouble writing interesting stories.

Do you identify with any of those statements?

If you do not, please jot in the margin a statement or two about what is true for you about writing.

No matter what your attitude or proficiency, you will learn enough guidelines and tools and read enough examples in this course to help you improve your writing abilities. If you apply what you learn here, you will develop practical writing skills you can use anywhere for the rest of your life.

Lesson 2

The Planning Phase

> BE ADVISED: The rest of this chapter may be TOO EASY if you are an **intermediate** or **accomplished** writer! You may already know the material. Hang in there. New stuff is on the way.

Some brief definitions are in order before we proceed . . .

Beginning writer: one who has not had much experience writing for school.

Intermediate writer: one who has written some essays for school but has not had much experience in the different types of writing (persuasion, exposition, description, and narration).

Accomplished writer: one who has written many kinds of essays and reports in high school and is preparing for college and/or professional writing.

Now back to your regularly scheduled lesson.

You wouldn't build a dog house without planning it first. The same is true for writing: Before you write, plan.

And part of planning, for a writer, is the tool of **brainstorming.**

Brainstorming helps you think. It means writing down ideas in a spontaneous, free-flowing manner, which is an essential tool for any writer. This is not the time to evaluate your ideas or hold them back. Just write them quickly and evaluate them later. Often a silly idea will lead to a usable one.

When your teacher gives you a broad topic, brainstorm. Make a list of ideas you can write about within the topic. If the teacher's topic is ecology, you have dozens of options. You could write about any of the following narrowed-down topics and still be in the general topic of ecology: recycling, the effect of a natural disaster on an area's ecology, toxic waste clean-ups, or a person who had an impact on how we think about conservation. If you have trouble thinking of ideas, ask a friend, classmate, or parent for ideas or go to a book on the subject and read the chapter headings.

Brainstorming can be effective—and more fun—when done with others. Many times you'll glean an idea from a brainstorming session with friends or classmates that you might not have thought of alone.

Try brainstorming with the brightness turned down on your computer screen; that's one weird way to gather ideas without immediately evaluating them. When you're through, turn the brightness back up and ponder your possibilities. And your spelling mistakes.

Practice 1.1

By now you may have thought of specific topics within the general topic of ecology. Write at least two ideas in the space below. If you get stuck, talk to others or consult a book on the subject for more ideas. Discuss your topics with your teacher. You will not be writing this as a report. This is just for practice—so have fun with it.

And the lesson continues . . .

The Trick to Finding a Topic

There is a trick to writing anything: find a topic that interests you. Writing about recycling may bore you to tears, but writing about saving eagles may capture your attention. When you have the chance to choose your topic, find an interesting angle and concentrate on that.

If your topic is chosen for you, hunt around until you find something about that topic that makes you tingle. It could be an electrifying finger-in-the-socket tingle or only a kids' carnival-ride sensation, but search for the thing that moves you. For instance, perhaps you have to write about World War II, but you usually give wars a yawn in history class. It now becomes your job to read about that war to find something that warms your blood or fires your imagination. Perhaps acts of heroism inspire you, or you may find that because one side won, your grandparents immigrated to another country. Maybe spy stories, POW (prisoner of war) facts, or stories of the Navajo Code Talkers fascinate you. Search for the interesting angle and follow it.

A bored student often produces a boring paper, and, let me tell you, your teacher already has enough boring papers to read. Let your paper be the one that shines. You just might make the writing experience more fun for yourself, as well.

Practice 1.2

Choose a topic that is too broad or that is of no interest to you. Write it on a clean piece of paper, the back of an envelope, the inside of an old cereal box, whatever. Then brainstorm different facets of that topic to narrow it down or find something of interest in it.

Be spontaneous with your ideas and don't criticize them. Identify something worth writing about in that too-broad or too-boring topic. Discuss your results with your teacher. You will not be writing this for a report; just take your ideas out for a joyride.

To use a colorful worksheet on the benefits of bike riding, go to https://writingwithsharonwatson.com/benefits-of-bike-riding-brainstorm-and-organize/ .

"You can't wait for inspiration.
You have to go after it with a club."
- Jack London

Chapter 2: Opinions

Lesson 1

Opinions are the doorway to persuasive writing, so let's stand on the porch for a few moments and talk about your opinions.

In the first chapter, you learned the trick of finding a topic that fires up your brain. The same is true for writing opinions. Choose something about which you have strong feelings, whether positive or negative. Writing is less painful if there is some intensity behind it.

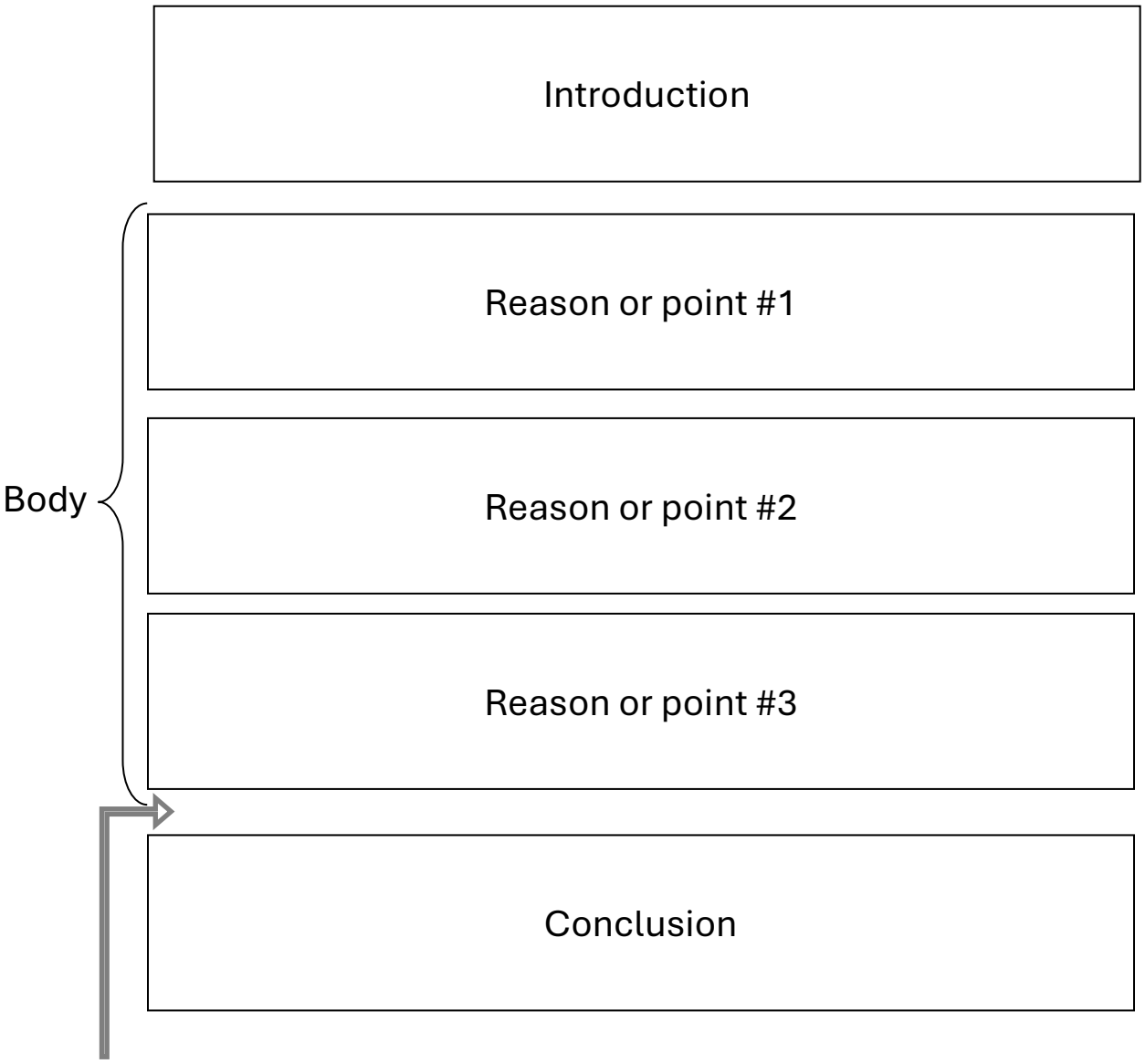
Writing your opinion includes stating what you like—or don't like—and then listing why. Perhaps you like gardening because you can control the herbicides and pesticides applied to the plants, you like grubbing around in the soil, and you enjoy the fresh taste of newly picked garden vegetables. Or maybe you cannot stand gardening because weeding is sweaty and tedious work, you grow more rocks than vegetables, and you don't even like vegetables.

Moving your opinion from a statement to a whole essay requires some finesse. The next sections will show you how to shape your paper.

SMUG ALERT: **Intermediate** and **accomplished** writers will already be familiar with the material in The Structure of an Essay, coming up next. Treat it as a quick review.

The Structure of an Essay

All nonfiction papers follow a certain format. They begin with an introductory paragraph, add *at least* three paragraphs for points or reasons, and end with a paragraph for a conclusion. That's the simple structure for any essay or report. It looks something like this (each rectangle represents a separate paragraph):



Of course, the first sentence in each paragraph is **indented three to five spaces**. Long reports or an in-depth treatment of a topic may require two or more paragraphs for an introduction. Each paragraph in the body develops only one main point, as stated in the topic sentence (more on topic sentences in chapter 3). For beginning writers, one paragraph = one point. Intermediate or accomplished writers may need more than one paragraph for a point.

If you find that your essay is one long paragraph, fix it. Go back through your work and make separate paragraphs: one to introduce your topic, one for each point, and one to conclude your topic.

Do you sit around and agonize over that first sentence for your essay? Agonize no more. Begin in the middle—the points or reasons, more commonly known as the **body**. The bulk of your paper is the body, so it makes sense to start there.

What about the thesis statement? Aren't you supposed to develop that before you can write anything?

If you know how to develop and use a thesis statement, go ahead and begin writing the introduction. If you have no idea what a thesis statement is yet, don't worry about it. You will learn soon enough. In the meantime, simply begin writing in the middle—your points—and add an introduction and conclusion that fit your points later.

Practice 2.1

On a separate piece of paper, use one sentence to state your opinion of teens owning credit cards. Write it in sentence form. Then make a list of at least five reasons why you hold this opinion. You may be able to think of plausible reasons for *and* against, but for this practice, please **choose a definite side**.

Lesson 2

Your Toolbox: Point Orders, part 1

Every profession needs tools, even the writing profession. This course includes many useful tools to make you a more knowledgeable and polished writer. You've already learned the brainstorming tool.

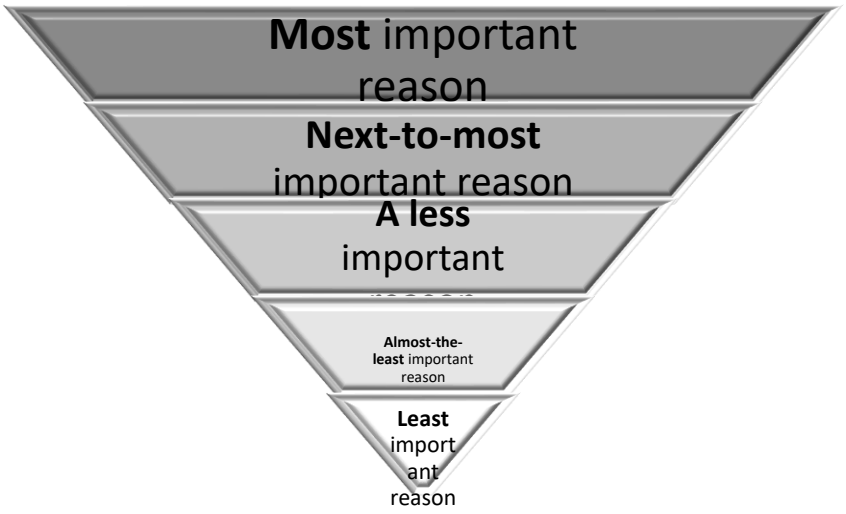
Today's tool is **point order.** When you brainstorm, you write ideas as they come to you. That's good. That's how to brainstorm. When it comes to planning the paragraphs, however, you will put your ideas in a rational order, with each reason getting at least one paragraph.

This course discusses six orders. A family of three orders is in this lesson, and the rest are in the next lesson.

The first order is a family or cluster of orders and is often called the **order of importance** or **emphatic order** ("emphatic" because the points are arranged according to their strength or emphasis). In this section, the words *strength*, *urgency*, *importance*, and *compelling* mean the same thing.

Inverted Triangle

A popular way to arrange points based on their importance or strength is the **inverted triangle:**



Point Orders

Importance or emphatic orders:
- Inverted triangle
- Psychological order
- Climactic order

Chronological order
Spatial order
Effect-size order
Specific-to-general order
General-to-specific order

This example has five reasons. Your number of reasons may vary, but the line-up—from **most** compelling to **least** compelling—will remain the same when you use this order.

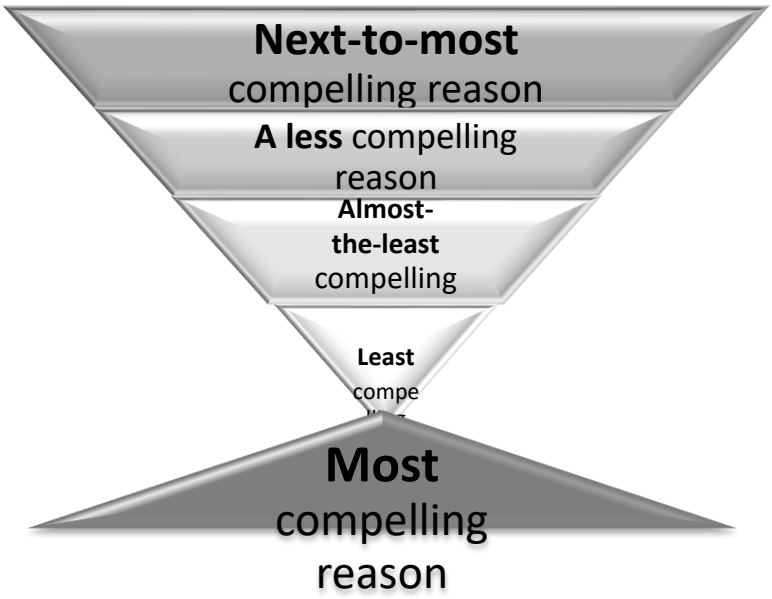
It would be easy to think that, because you are writing a "least important" reason, it can be wimpy, like overcooked broccoli. Not so. All of your reasons should be sparkling, brilliant, and awe inspiring.

Reporters typically use the above method (and they call it the *inverted triangle*) for two reasons: 1) they need to capture their readers' attention quickly, and 2) they are not in control of their article's final length. The editor can lop off the end of the article, depending on how much space is available on the newspaper page. So the reporter puts the most important information in the beginning of the article and arranges all the other points in descending order of importance. This order will come in handy for some of your own essays or papers, too.

How do you know which points are the most important? Sometimes it will be obvious; their strength will leap out at you. Other times you will decide which ones are the most compelling reasons based on your audience. If you're writing to children about the dangers of drinking too much sugary soda, your point about potential kidney problems will be in the "least compelling" category because children have difficulty grasping the idea of themselves in the future.

Psychological Order

The **psychological order** belongs in the importance family (shaped like a strange hourglass):



The psychological order takes into account that people often read the first and last reasons and only skim the middle ones.

This order is much like a band or choir concert. It begins with the second-best song the band or choir performs so the audience is wowed by the performers' expertise. At the end, the program delivers the best song, leaving no doubt of the band or choir's superior musical talent. Many professional writers sift through their facts and anecdotes to find one that has the most impact, and they save that for the last point, giving the biggest bang at the end. Readers are left with an indelible image.

Point Orders

Importance or emphatic orders:
- Inverted triangle
- Psychological order
- Climactic order

Chronological order
Spatial order
Effect-size order
Specific-to-general order
General-to-specific order

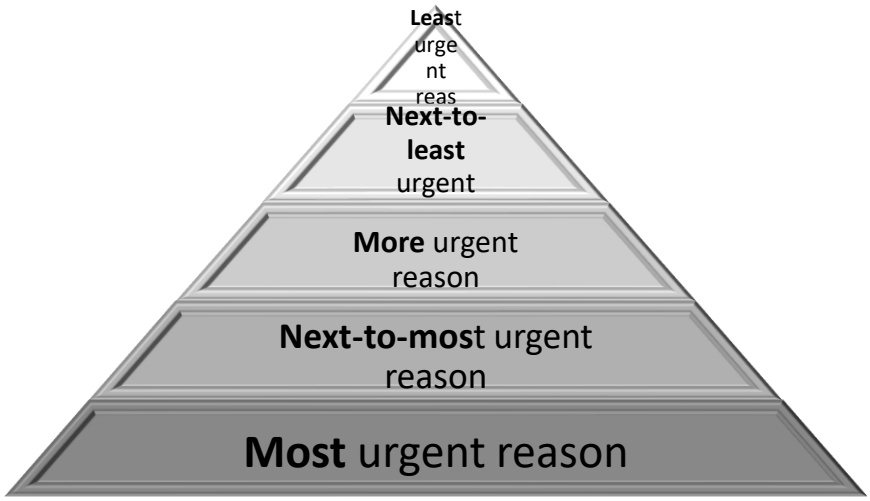
When you write the last and most important point in your essay using the psychological order, include a key phrase that will alert readers of its importance:

- ✓ But most important . . .
- ✓ Of greatest consequence . . .
- ✓ But nothing beats . . .
- ✓ Ultimately . . .
- ✓ It is of the utmost importance . . .

Avoid using the psychological order if you have only three reasons; it feels as if the middle drops out of the article, and your strongest reason will be diluted. Use it with four or more reasons or points.

Climactic Order

Another pattern belongs in this order-of-importance family. It's called the **climactic order**:



Point Orders

Importance or emphatic orders:
- Inverted triangle
- Psychological order
- Climactic order

Chronological order
Spatial order
Effect-size order
Specific-to-general order

The climactic order builds from weakest to strongest, "weakest" being a relative term. The key phrases used in the psychological order work well in this one, too, as you work through to your most important reason.

Two other methods of arranging your points are worthy of mention here:

- ✓ Simplest to most complex
- ✓ Most familiar to least familiar

Choosing an appropriate order for your points makes the information easier to understand and assimilate. No reader wants to feel dizzy and confused, as though bouncing around in a pinball machine.

Practice 2.2

On the next page you'll find an opinion and four points to support it. Put numbers next to each point to indicate **most** important (1) to **least** important (4). Then decide which importance order will be most effective for this topic and write it in the margin.

Opinion: Cell phone usage while driving needs government regulation.

Reasons:

- Distracted drivers cause many accidents.
- Distractions such as talking on a cell phone or texting while driving cause drivers to miss turns or exits or make poor driving decisions.
- Accident fatalities involving cell phone usage are increasing.
- Many drivers are already multitasking. Cell phone usage puts this trend over the top.

This is the end of the sample.

Meet the Author

Sharon Watson is the author of *Jump In*, our popular middle school course. She was forced to retire from homeschooling after 18 years when she ran out of her own children, but her love of teaching permeates her writing and literature courses. Sharon's popular course *The Power in Your Hands: Writing Nonfiction in High School, 2nd Edition* is based on her sought-after writing classes and is the sequel to *Jump In*.

Let her practical textbooks **teach writing for you:**

- *Jump In*, print and digital
- *The Power in Your Hands: Writing Nonfiction in High School, 2nd Edition,* print and digital
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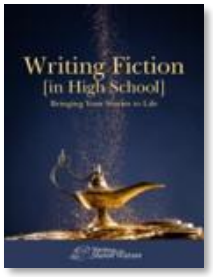

Teens enjoy the relaxed way they learn **literature** with Sharon's Illuminating Literature series: *Characters in Crisis* and *When Worlds Collide*. These unstuffy courses **prepare** your teens for college literature courses, **equip** them for the rest of their reading lives, and **reveal** the secret power of the author to influence their minds and hearts.