

**The eLearning Coach Podcast #30**  
**ELC 030: Strategies for Organizing Instructional Content**  
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Welcome to The eLearning Coach Podcast, online at [theelearningcoach.com](http://theelearningcoach.com). I'm Connie Malamed, bringing you ideas and tips for success with creating online and mobile learning experiences.

Hello learning people, and welcome to episode 30 of the eLearning Coach Podcast. In this episode I'm going solo. I wanted to talk about a topic that has generated a lot of interest on my website, and that is how to organize instructional content. If you're really interested in this topic you don't need to take notes because most of the things I'm going to say are in an article and I will link to it in the show notes at [theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/30/](http://theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/30/).

If you design instructional materials or learning experiences you can be involved in so many different types of activities. One day you could be designing an online course and the next thing you know you're organizing content for a blog post or you're writing training manuals. You could be creating reference materials or organizing the architecture of a learning portal, or making job aids. The common denominator with all of those tasks is that the content has to be organized in some way that makes it easy for people to access it, understand it and in many cases retain it. So you need to find the most meaningful high level structure for the content, whether it's for systematic training to improve performance, or to impart knowledge, or for exploration and discovery.

So I wanted to discuss ten different types of organizational strategies that I know about that can help streamline the design process and hopefully help learners and users understand the larger framework of the content. So here goes: content organization strategies.

The first strategy is alphabetical order. Remember in elementary school when you first learned alphabetical order and how to look things up in a dictionary? People have been using this approach for so long that it has become conventional, it has become intuitive. Although it's not a good approach for systematic instruction, it's ideal for anything that is in a list format, that doesn't have any other logic, such as glossaries, resource lists, help documentation, etc. So the first organizational strategy is an obvious one, and that's alphabetical order.

Do you ever work with content that has a completely flat structure, there's just no hierarchy, no sequence, and all of the topics are more or less at the same level with no prerequisites? In that case you can go with the categorical structure. A categorical structure is a nonlinear structure. For example, if you're teaching how to use software you might organize it by tasks, such as the main editing tasks in Word. Or you might organize by products, such as teaching a sales force the features of all the laptops. So the second content organization strategy is categorical, arranging information by categories when there's a flat structure.

Moving on, organizational strategy number three is cause and effect. This may not be the first approach that comes to mind but I think it can be really powerful. For example, think of a management course on handling difficult staff situations, that could be arranged by explaining the cause of common problems, the effects that they have on the organization, and how to overcome them. Or in a course on residential wiring the content can be organized by poor wiring practices and the effect they have on a system and then teaching the solutions. So that's cause and effect.

The fourth strategy is one of my favorites just because it has unlimited possibilities and I refer to it as 'inherent structure'. What I mean is often content has its own structure that we can use for organizational purposes. If the content is naturally in a chronological order, then a timeline or a story is appropriate. If the content revolves around various geographical areas, then organization by location is a natural fit. Here's another example: you're teaching a course to agricultural extension agents about soil, that course could be organized by soil layers, starting with the top soil. So the fourth strategy is inherent structure, you structure the content in a way that's aligned with how we might think about it. You look for the natural cognitive fit.

Now let's look at number five, which is organizing content by order of importance. This can be effective for a flat structure that has no hierarchy or prerequisites. And because learners usually pay the most attention to the beginning and end of a topic, you might want to place the most important content at the start and at the end, or from the most important to the least important. An analysis of your content will help you figure out which approach to choose. So here's an example: in an online presentation for new employees, Human Resources might first want to introduce critical security issues in how to safeguard company information prior to discussing less important issues such as things like the office holiday party. So strategy number five is order of importance.

Are you still with me? Let's move on to number six. The next strategy is 'simple to complex'. You can use this approach even when the simpler content is not subordinate or prerequisite to the complex content. You can use it just as a way to build learner confidence in working with the subject matter, because it provides a slow initiation into the subject. Here's an example: to get learners comfortable with talking about and thinking about financial topics, a course on personal finance might teach a little bit about how a savings account works prior to teaching something more complex, like how to balance a checkbook.

So although the savings accounts content is not prerequisite for balancing the checkbook, it's an easier concept to grasp, and it's like dipping your toes into the water before you jump in all the way. In that example you could say that that initial content is extraneous to the real key points that you need to make. So if you are going to introduce something initially just to make people feel comfortable, I would keep it very light, and perhaps you can even use it in an analogical way to help them understand the key content that will improve performance. So number six was 'simple to complex'.

Moving on to number seven, this strategy is sequential. It's a standard way to present content that is a process or a procedure. Use this approach when you need to structure things as a series of steps. A sequential structure is also good for teaching skills. An example is a course that teaches how to draw blood from a patient, that would require a sequential structure. So, just to recap, strategy number seven is organizing content in a sequence.

Did you ever think of using a spiral strategy? That's number eight. This can be effective when you're looking at an entire curriculum or maybe creating multiple courses. So with the spiral structure you revisit each topic in a systematic way, each time in a more detailed and complex level. And I think that's how we learned mathematics in school. Strategy number eight is organizing content in a spiral approach.

Strategy number nine: subordinate to a higher level. Perhaps this is the most well-used structure for designing courses. Because so much of what people learn is based on prerequisite knowledge and skills, so when the content requires that the person master the subordinate skills or knowledge to be able to advance to a higher level, a hierarchical structure is effective—and that word is not easy to say. Here's an example. As a prerequisite to learning how to handle difficult customers at a call center, learners would first need to know the basics of effective communication. So strategy number nine is 'subordinate to a higher level'.

Finally number ten. This strategy is 'whole to parts'. With this approach you introduce the big picture or the system view first and then you delve into the parts of the system. In this way you give learners a framework for fitting information together in memory, like pieces of a puzzle fitting together. I don't want to get confusing but 'whole to parts' reminds me of a 'general to specific' strategy, I see those two as kind of similar. Anyway, an example of 'whole to parts' might be in documentation about computer repair, first you would present the higher level systems of the computer and then you would present the components of each system. So strategy number ten is 'whole to parts'.

I hate to say this but there are two more content organization strategies that I want to add. One was suggested by a reader who said that you can organize things spatially, such as when teaching anatomy you can organize from front to back, top to bottom, inside to outside, or vice versa. You could say that's a subset of inherent structure, but that's really getting nerdy.

And the other one I wanted to add is organizing content into stories and scenarios. I think that counts as a strategy.

Okay that was really the last one. Now I just want to list them all: Alphabetical, Categorical, Cause and Effect, Inherent Structure, Order of Importance, Simple to Complex, Sequential, Spiral, Subordinate to a Higher Level, Whole to Parts, Spatial, and Stories. If you have any more to add you can leave a comment at [thelearningcoach.com/podcasts/30](http://thelearningcoach.com/podcasts/30). I'll talk to you next time. Take care.