# Organization

## The Secret to Academic Writing

JOHN LOCKE

FALL 2020

Graduate Writing Center
Naval Postgraduate School

# Workshop Outline

Problem: Disorganized, hard-to-follow writing.
Solution: A systematic (non-chaotic) writing process leading to well-organized writing.

1. What's Different About Academic Writing?
   a) Example
   b) Principles
2. Collapsing Data into Meaning
   a) "Analysis"
   b) Example
   c) Hierarchies of Information
3. Structured Writing
   a) Introductions
      i. History of the World in One Sentence
      ii. Roadmap graph
   b) Standard Academic Paragraph
   c) Good academic paragraph?
   d) Overall Logical Flow
4. We Need a Plan
5. Organization: Where It Fits
6. Outlining
   a) Tools
      i. Traditional
      ii. MS-Word
   b) A Classic Organizational Puzzle
7. Disclaimers
8. Jeffrey Herbst example

**Slides at:** https://my.nps.edu/web/gwc/resident-workshops

# What's Different About Academic Writing?

**Entertainment style:**

It was a dark and foggy night. The stranger plodded across the deserted parking lot to the front doors of the 7-Eleven. Beads of perspiration dotted his forehead. His lips twitched nervously. He thrust a hand into his pocket, rubbed his fingers for reassurance across the cold, metal object concealed inside. The object made him feel powerful, more than alive. He entered the store and stalked straight to the cashier. Pulling the money clip from his pocket, he muttered, "Pack of Marlboros—unfiltered."

- **Goal**: create suspense
- **Style**: ambiguity
- **Context**: at end
- **Structure**: timeline
- **Reader**: forced to interpret

**Academic style:**

The subject's behavior had an innocent explanation. He walked because his destination was close. He dressed heavily because of the fog. He chose his local 7-Eleven, knowing there would be no waiting at that late hour. He paid in cash since he hadn't received his new VISA card yet. Tired, he said little.

- **Goal**: create understanding
- **Style**: specificity
- **Context**: at beginning
- **Structure**: sequenced ideas/information
- **Reader**: guided from beginning to end

# What's Different About Academic Writing?

Every form of writing has a unique objective. Think about the difference between a political speech, a novel, a how-to manual, a poem, or movie review, etc. The objective dictates methods, styles, and formats. What then is different about academic or research-based writing?

The objective of academic writing:

- The primary purpose of academic writing is to create a formal record of a research inquiry, not to provide a beginning-to-end reading experience.

The unique problems of academic writing:

- We are writing about the objective truth in the world, not the subjective truth in our minds.
- Knowledge is vast.
- Academic writing usually describes the relationship between ideas rather than telling stories. We explain how some part of the world works, usually applying theory to facts.

The solution:

- Narrow the topic.
  - We are specialized writers with specialized readers. Similar issues may address completely different audiences.
- Employ structured writing that continually places context before detail.
- State facts simply and accurately.
  - The academic voice
  - Academic vocabulary

# "Analysis"

The process of separating something into its constituent elements.

examples

**salt** =
sodium + chloride
& how they bond

**French politics** =
culture + history + laws + political parties + labor orgs + international relations
& how they interact

# Collapsing Data into Meaning

MEANING

**Opening sentence of 761-word article***

A new study has found that only one-third of people diagnosed with gluten sensitivity actually experience adverse side effects from gluten intake, adding further weight to the growing suspicion among scientists that gluten intolerance isn't actually a thing.

DATA

**Random passage from the article**

The study, led by a team of gastroenterologists from the University and Spedali Civili of Brescia in Italy, involved recruiting 35 volunteers who had been diagnosed with non-celiac gluten sensitivity (NCGS). This condition is based on a small 2011 study that found gluten-containing diets can cause gastrointestinal pain in people who don't have caeliac disease - an autoimmune disorder that flares up with gluten intake.

These volunteers had been living off a strict gluten-free diet for at least six months before the study, and were then asked to complete a series of "challenges" involving gluten-containing and gluten-free flours. Completely blind to what they were actually eating, the volunteers were given sealed sachets simply labelled "A" and "B," each containing 10 grams of flour.

For the first stage of the experiment . . .

* BEC Crew, "Study: Two-Thirds of Gluten-Sensitive People Had No Ill Effects When Given Gluten," September 1, 2015, www.sciencealert.com/study-finds-two-thirds-of-gluten-sensitive-people-had-no-adverse-side-effects-when-given-gluten

# Hierarchies of Information

A new study has found that only one-third of people diagnosed with gluten sensitivity actually experience adverse side effects from gluten intake, adding further weight to the growing suspicion among **scientists** that gluten intolerance isn't actually a thing.

Categorizing by component →

| what | who (2) | findings |
|---|---|---|
| "new study," "gluten sensitivity," etc. | 1) "scientists" 2) "people diagnosed…" | "one-third" |
| goals and scope of study | 1) "team of gastroenterologists from Brecsia University" 2 ) people with NCGS | representative sample of significant numbers |
| complete, detailed description of scope of study | 1) detailed profiles of the scientists with their qualifications 2) demographics/medical profile of subjects | complete description of data with relevant graphs and tables |

more general

more detailed

## Level of detail

### phrase, sentence

- **purpose**: establish context
- **found in**: thesis statement, topic sentence, abstract, etc.

### article

- **purpose**: high-level description, review
- **found in**: article, class paper, executive summary

### full study

- **purpose**: prove something, publish knowledge
- **found in**: thesis, dissertation, journal article

# Structured Writing: Introductions

Introductions can be like abstracts. Establish—briefly and clearly—the problem boundary, the purpose and outline of the paper, and even the result. Collapse the entire paper content into an accurate generalization. Save the details for later.

context : problem/issue : research question
roadmap/methodology/argument : thesis/finding

After 9/11, the Transportation Security Administration was created to ensure the safety of the nation's transportation systems. Initial policies resulted in inefficient procedures, exemplified by air passengers waiting in long lines for security screening. While that procedure has been streamlined, other issues remain unresolved. A particularly vexing problem is the issue of liquid carry-ons. Current policy is based on *quantity*: liquids are limited to 3.4 ounces per container. But are there *qualitative* methods available for screening liquids? This paper will review two potential methods based on emerging technologies: chemical x-ray screening and digital molecular analysis. Both methods were evaluated for cost, effectiveness, and efficiency. The evidence will show that chemical x-ray screening best meets the qualitative requirements, but is currently cost prohibitive.

# History of the World in One Sentence

Humankind has progressed from living in caves to flying through outer space.

# Structured Writing: Introductions
## (graph of example)

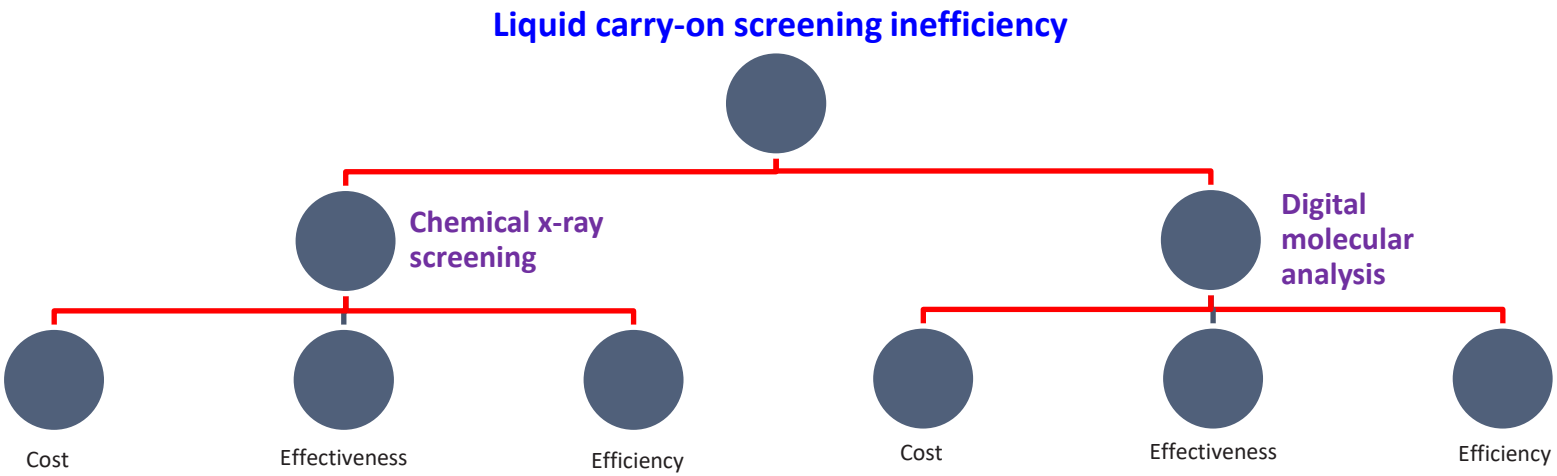
The roadmap lays out the shape of the entire organization. It puts the top levels of the outline into words.

Roadmap: "This paper will review two potential methods based on emerging technologies: chemical x-ray screening and digital molecular analysis. Both methods were evaluated for cost, effectiveness, and efficiency."

**ONE PROBLEM**

**TWO POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS**

**THREE CRITERIA PER SOLUTION**




Boundary statement: "While the cost of x-ray screening appears reasonable, a more problematic issue is effectiveness."

# Structured Writing: Standard Academic Paragraph

Organization goes down to the paragraph level.

**Follow this order to achieve logical flow in a paragraph:**

- **Topic sentence** (identify the key idea(s); describe it briefly and precisely)
- Facts/evidence (unless engaged in philosophy, analysis needs a foundation in fact)
- Analysis (make a case that the facts argue for the idea of the topic sentence)

**Example:**

The Acme digital molecular unit (DMU) scored 100% in volatility detection, but the machine requires frequent calibration. The standard Knoles Volatility Test was applied by a Princeton team, under the oversight of a TSA scientist. The test was conducted using the most rigorous protocols, and the DMU performed well. However, the sensitive sensors of the DMU demonstrated wear after only 84 hours of continuous usage. Volatility detection immediately dropped from 100% to the 91-96% range.[4] Risks may still be low at these levels, but for the liquid-volatility problem, any value below 100% must be considered unacceptable.[5] Therefore, the sensors would have to be replaced before 84 hours at an interval deemed to be reliably safe.

**separate or mingle, as appropriate**

The topic sentence should be a general statement, but comprehensive.

# Structured Writing: Overall Logical Flow

Logical flow passes from one topic sentence to the next, not from the end of one paragraph to the beginning of the next. This works best when comprehensive introductory material tells the reader how things fit together.

topic sentence : facts/evidence : analysis

**Example:**

By the late 1970s, the inflation rate was widely viewed as the primary indicator of the economy's health. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Analysis. Analysis. Analysis. Analysis. Analysis. Analysis. Analysis. Analysis.

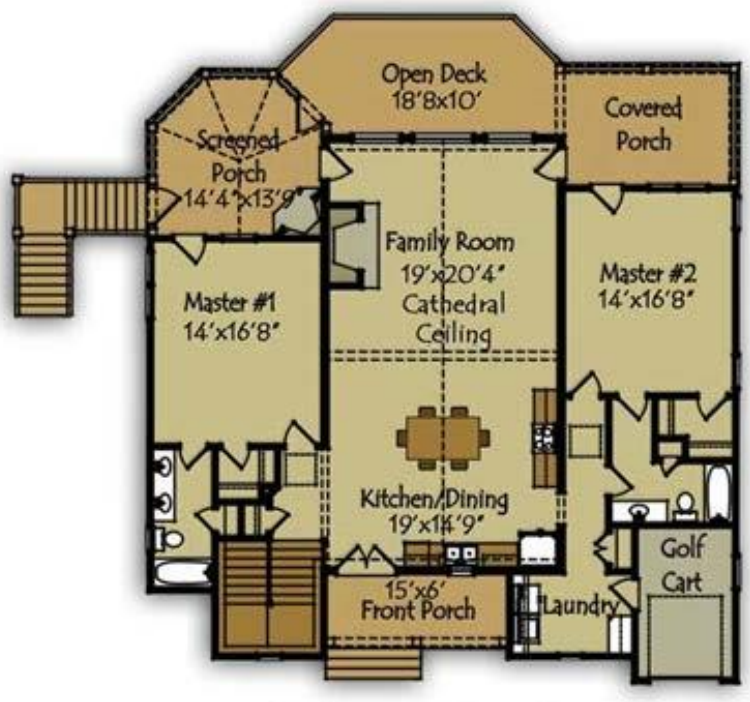
During the period, a school of economic thought developed around the idea that the unemployment rate was the true primary indicator. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Analysis. Analysis. Analysis. Analysis. Analysis. Analysis. Analysis. Analysis.

This new school, however, had difficulty getting past the argument that the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics unemployment figure was flawed in several respects. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Facts/evidence. Analysis. Facts/evidence. Analysis. Facts/evidence. Analysis. Facts/evidence. Analysis. Facts/evidence. Analysis. Analysis. Analysis. Analysis.

# We Need a Plan

*Would you combine these two processes?*

*Where is it cheaper to make changes?*



**In writing terms:**

**Organization** **Sentences**

**The writer is both the architect and the builder.**

# Organization: Where It Fits

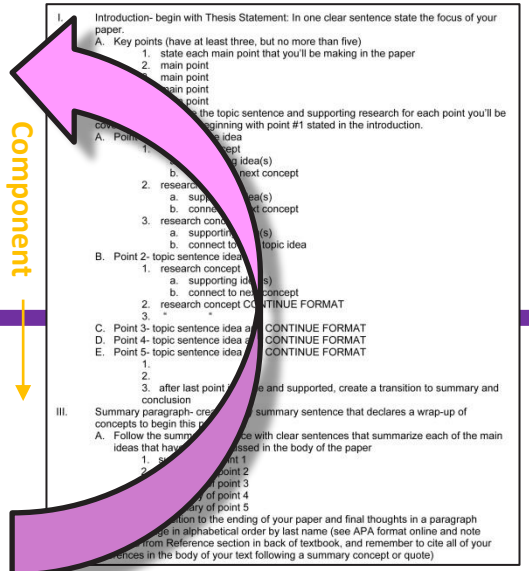
1

2

3

The paper in your mind

Component

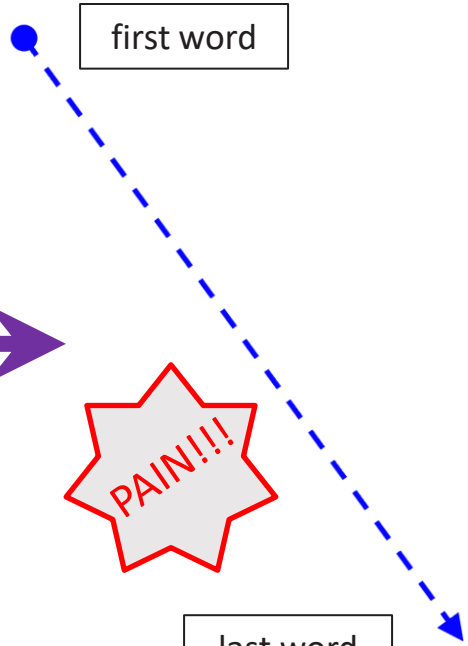


I. Introduction- begin with Thesis Statement: In one clear sentence state the focus of your paper.
A. Key points (have at least three, but no more than five)
1. state each main point that you'll be making in the paper
2. main point
3. main point
4. main point
5. point

the topic sentence and supporting research for each point you'll be
beginning with point #1 stated in the introduction.
A. Poin idea
1. cept
a. g idea(s)
b. next concept
2. research
a. sup ea(s)
b. conne t concept
3. research conc
a. supportin (s)
b. connect to topic idea
B. Point 2- topic sentence idea
1. research concept
a. supporting id (s)
b. connect to ne concept
2. research concept CONTINUE FORMAT
3. " "
C. Point 3- topic sentence idea a CONTINUE FORMAT
D. Point 4- topic sentence idea a CONTINUE FORMAT
E. Point 5- topic sentence idea CONTINUE FORMAT
1.
2.
3. after last point e and supported, create a transition to summary and conclusion
III. Summary paragraph- cre summary sentence that declares a wrap-up of concepts to begin this p
A. Follow the summ e with clear sentences that summarize each of the main ideas that hav ssed in the body of the paper
1. s int 1
2. point 2
f point 3
y of point 4
ary of point 5
tion to the ending of your paper and final thoughts in a paragraph
e in alphabetical order by last name (see APA format online and note
from Reference section in back of textbook, and remember to cite all of your
ences in the body of your text following a summary concept or quote)

Level of detail

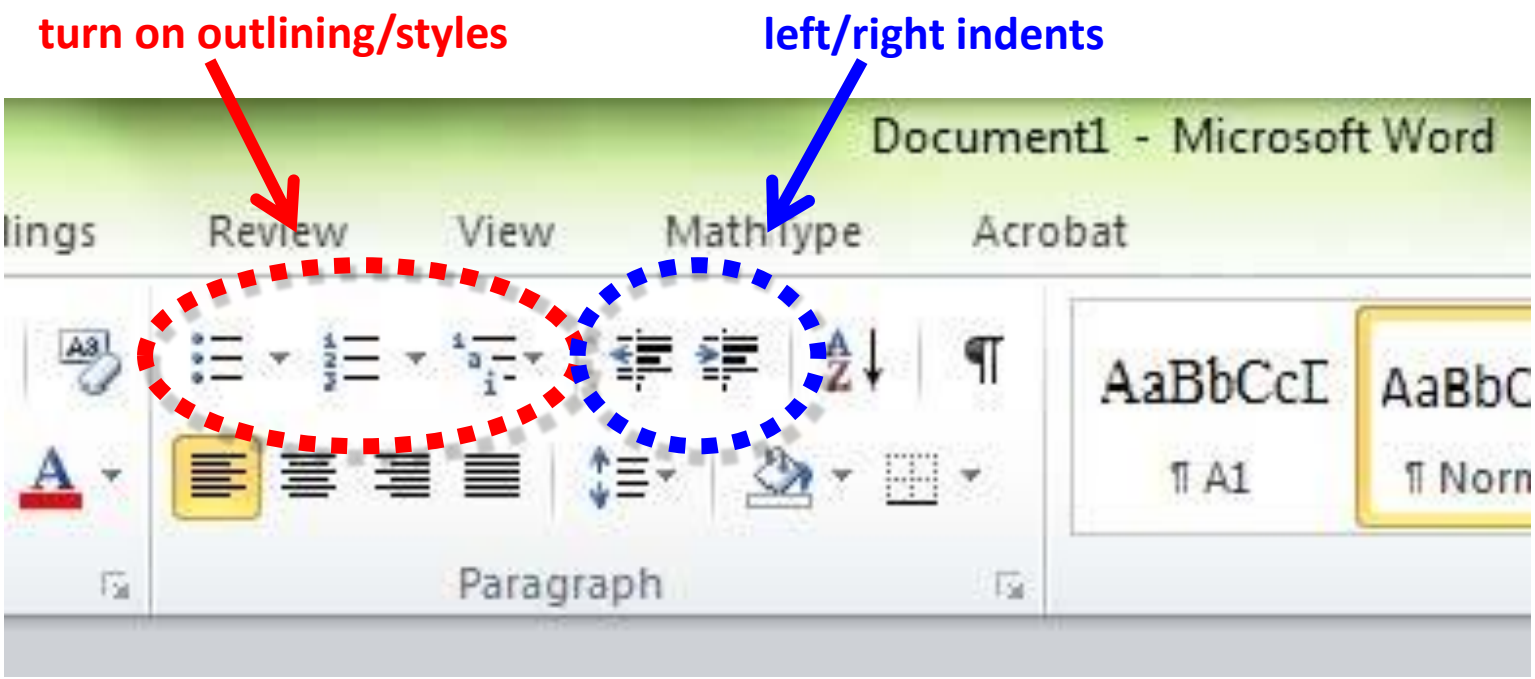
The organizational puzzle




The final product: a one-dimensional object

# Outlining: Tools

A. Traditional methods of organization
   1. Pencil and paper
   2. 3 x 5” cards
   3. Post-It® notes on wall
B. MS-Word (or PowerPoint) outlining tools
   1. Turn outlining on/off
   2. Move indentation left/right
   3. Moves lines up/down



# Outlining:
# A Classic Organizational Puzzle

**The generic NPS paper:**

1. Take a theory with [1-3] parts
2. Apply to [1-2] case studies

(higher number = more complex organizational problem)

"There are two objectives that I want you to focus on for this memo: 1) Showing that you have a firm grasp on one or more theories/paradigms; 2) Showing that you can try to apply it to a real-world event in world politics. The idea is to write an analytical memo that helps show how useful you find these theories in helping to better understand contemporary world politics."—from NSA professor Michael Glosny essay prompt

**The class assignment:**

1. Dictator Theory (explains why are some nations are ruled by dictators)
   i. Weak institutions
   ii. Widespread corruption
   iii. Tradition of strongman rule
2. Case studies of countries with dictators
   i. Framistan
   ii. Easternova
3. Does the theory apply to these cases?

# Outlining: A Classic Organizational Puzzle

**Approach 1, theory as main structure:**

1. Intro
   i. Brief context
   ii. Purpose of paper
   iii. Methodology/roadmap
   iv. Thesis
2. Discussion of Dictator Theory
   i. Weak institutions
   ii. Widespread corruption
   iii. Tradition of strongman rule
3. Introduce countries
   i. Framistan
   ii. Easternova
4. Argument: Components
   i. Weak institutions
      a) Framistan
      b) Easternova
   ii. Widespread corruption
      a) Framistan
      b) Easternova
   iii. Tradition of strongman rule
      a) Framistan
      b) Easternova
5. Conclusion

**Approach 2, case studies as main structure:**

1. Intro
   i. Brief context
   ii. Purpose of paper
   iii. Methodology/roadmap
   iv. Thesis
2. Discussion of Dictator Theory
   i. Weak institutions
   ii. Widespread corruption
   iii. Tradition of strongman rule
3. Introduce countries
   i. Framistan
   ii. Easternova
4. Argument: Case studies
   i. Framistan
      a) Weak institutions
      b) Widespread corruption
      c) Tradition of strongman rule
   ii. Easternova
      a) Weak institutions
      b) Widespread corruption
      c) Tradition of strongman rule
5. Conclusion

# Outlining:
# A Classic Organizational Puzzle

**Approach 1, theory as main structure:**

4. Argument: Components
   i. Weak institutions
      a) Framistan
      b) Easternova
   ii. Widespread corruption
      a) Framistan
      b) Easternova
   iii. Tradition of strongman rule
      a) Framistan
      b) Easternova

**Approach 2, case studies as main structure:**

4. Argument: Case studies
   i. Framistan
      a) Weak institutions
      b) Widespread corruption
      c) Tradition of strongman rule
   ii. Easternova
      a) Weak institutions
      b) Widespread corruption
      c) Tradition of strongman rule

**Which approach is superior? Considerations:**

- What's the intent of the paper?
- What is the argument? (What does the evidence suggest?)
- Where is the best evidence?
- Which categories have the most evidence?
- What's the ratio of background to analysis?
- Which approach reduces redundancy?
- Which approach reduces fragmentation?

**The puzzle has to be solved for every paper . . . no one-size-fits-all solution.**

# Disclaimers

- This is an approach to writing a research paper, not a strict requirement or a template. Mix and match techniques as necessary.
- Your professor is probably not a writing critic. He or she has the same expectation as any reader: a clear definition of the paper's purpose and an orderly execution.
- With proper outlining and organization, there's no such thing as *writer's block*, because you know what you're going to write before you write it. Instead you may have *researcher's block*: is my research question valid? where is the evidence? how is it evaluated? is it sufficient? In academic writing, the creativity is in the research, not the writing.
- Does good organization make writing easy? A good paper will always be challenging to write, but good organization moves the effort to where it will get the best return, the learning phase not the writing phase.

# Jeffrey Herbst Example

Article example which illustrates a flexible approach. Jeffrey Herbst, in "War and the State in Africa" (*International Security*, Spring 1990), blends a more detailed context with a description of the formal elements of the paper, i.e. problem, methodology, argument, research question, thesis, roadmap, and remedy to the problem. He also builds in structural elements and topic sentences as he goes.

Color-coded pdf available on GWC website:
https://my.nps.edu/web/gwc/resident-workshops
under "Organization: The Secret to Clear Writing"

# The End

*Plan well and discover that you're a much better writer than you knew.*

Questions?

Slides at:
https://my.nps.edu/web/gwc/resident-workshops