Advance Organizer

An instructional technique that helps people understand new information in terms of what they already know.

Advance organizers are brief chunks of information—spoken, written, or illustrated—presented prior to new material to help facilitate learning and understanding. They are distinct from overviews and summaries in that they are presented on a more abstract level than the rest of the information—they present the “big picture” prior to the details. Since the technique depends on a defined entry point, it is generally applied to linear presentations (e.g., traditional classroom instruction), and does not work as well in nonlinear, exploratory learning contexts (e.g., free-play simulation).¹

There are two kinds of advance organizers: expository and comparative. The decision to use one or the other depends on whether the information is new to people or similar to material they already know. Expository advance organizers are useful when audiences have little or no knowledge similar to the information being taught. For example, prior to presenting information on how to control a forklift to an audience that knows nothing about them, an advance expository organizer would first briefly describe the equipment and its function.²

Comparative advance organizers are useful when audiences have existing knowledge similar to the information being presented. For example, in teaching experienced forklift operators about how to control a new type of forklift, an advance comparative organizer would compare and contrast features and operations between the familiar forklift and the new forklift.

The technique’s effectiveness has been difficult to validate, but it does appear to have measurable benefits. Use advance organizers in learning situations that begin with an introduction and present information in a linear sequence. When presenting novel information, use expository advance organizers. When presenting information that is similar to what people know, use comparative advance organizers.³


² An overview or summary, by contrast, would just present the key points on how to control a forklift.


See also Inverted Pyramid, Rosetta Stone, and Wayfinding.
This is an expository advance organizer for advance organizers. At an abstract level, it illustrates that advance organizers are a kind of instructional strategy (like chunking, inverted pyramid, and storytelling) and that there are two types.

An expository advance organizer defines a forklift using familiar concepts (e.g., vehicle) prior to presenting specific information about forklift operation.

A comparative advance organizer leverages familiarity with the 1300A model forklift to introduce the 2300A model.

### Expository Advance Organizers

#### Familiar Knowledge

A forklift is a small industrial vehicle with a power-operated pronged platform that can be raised and lowered for insertion under a load to be lifted and moved.

#### New Information

To operate a forklift safely, the operator should know:

1. How a forklift works
2. How to inspect a forklift
3. How to operate a forklift

- How a forklift works
- How to inspect a forklift
- How to operate a forklift

### Comparative Advance Organizers

#### Familiar Knowledge

- Acme Forklift 1300A
- Acme Forklift 1300A Rated Capacity
- Acme Forklift 1300A Load Center
- Acme Forklift 1300A Special Instructions

#### New Information

- Acme Forklift 2300A
- Acme Forklift 2300A Rated Capacity
- Acme Forklift 2300A Load Center
- Acme Forklift 2300A Special Instructions

A comparative advance organizer leverages familiarity with the 1300A model forklift to introduce the 2300A model.