

Looking to organize? Group like with like

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This article is the third in a series called *Shipshape Basic Training*. In this series, I'll describe basic organizing principles and how you can utilize them to organize your home, your office, and your life.

This article is the third in a series about basic organizing principles. In the first article, I wrote about the importance of creating and maintaining systems, or organized methods for performing



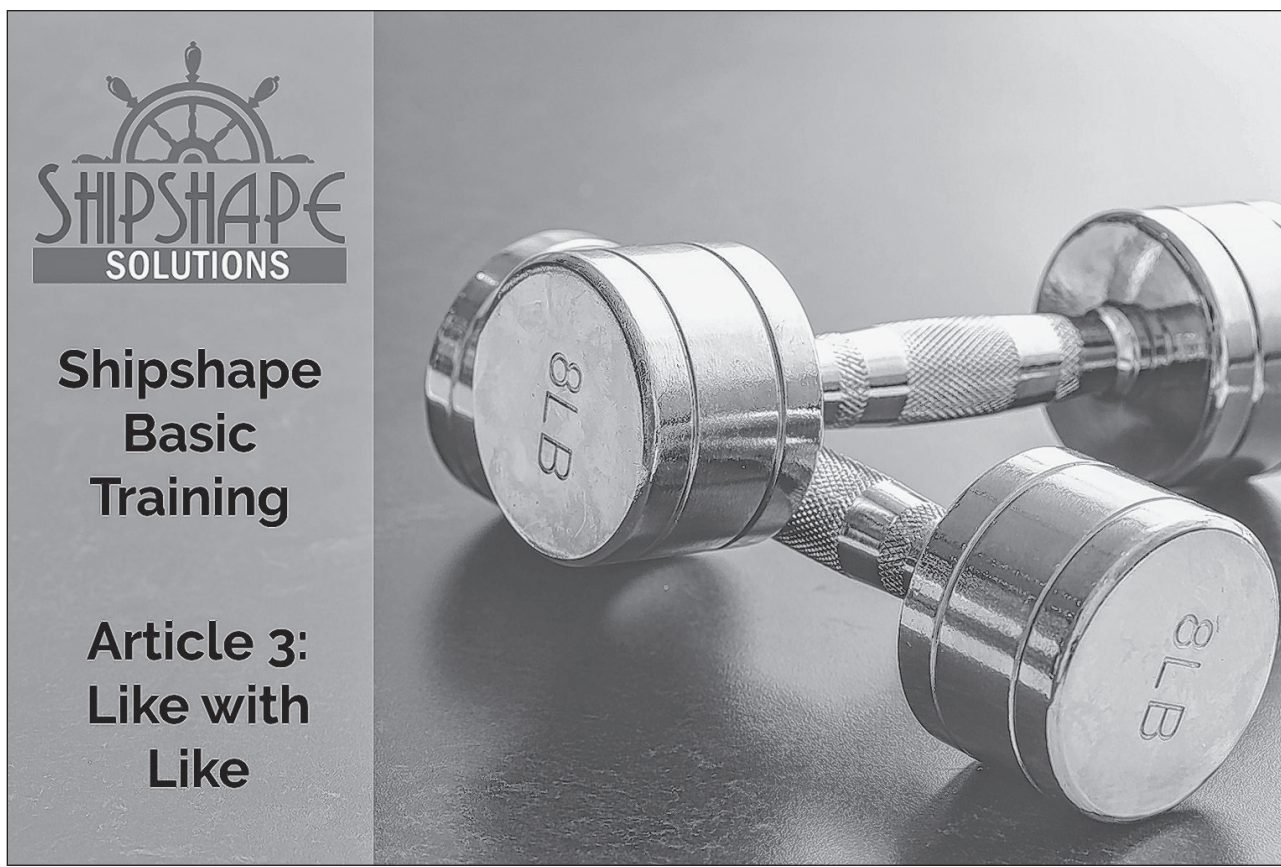
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activities. Having a clear routine for tasks such as laundry, getting ready for the day, or dealing with paper can do wonders for making your home life more ordered and peaceful. The organizing principle discussed in the second article was having homes for everything. A home is an established place where an object is stored when not in use. This practice is indispensable for keeping order in any setting.

Perhaps the most universal of all organizing principles is the practice of grouping like items together. Finding what you're looking for is so much easier if similar items are kept in the same area. It seems quite logical and basic for many people. But often I have found that although people may understand the principle, they sometimes don't know how to put it into practice in certain areas of their home. Or they may struggle with choosing among different options for grouping to find one they can actually maintain. Many times there are multiple ways to group like items.

Picking the best option requires considering several factors. The best way to illustrate this principle is by considering an example that we can all appreciate — organizing the clothing in our bedroom closet.

There are several different approaches for grouping clothing in a closet. You could use the same like with like principle and end up with any of these arrangements:



— Group by articles of clothing (all pants together, all shirts together, all sport coats together, etc.)

— Group by what setting the clothing is worn in (casual clothing for staying home, clothing for work, clothing for formal events, etc.)

— Group by color (all white clothes together, all black clothes together, etc.)

— Group by outfit (clothes that are usually worn together hung up together)

With many of those groupings, it's possible to further sort them by category. For example, if clothing is grouped by article of clothing, you could put all short-sleeve shirts together, all long-sleeve shirts together, all capri-length pants together, all full-length pants together, etc. You could even group further by color within the specific articles of clothing.

With all of these options, you may be wondering which one is best. There's no right or wrong answer to this question. The best option is the one that will work for you! It depends on several factors.

Sometimes the different factors present a trade-off. For example, if your clothes are grouped by the broad article of clothing (shirts), then by the specific article of clothing (long-sleeve shirts) and then by color, it shouldn't take you long to find that black cardigan you want to wear.

On the other hand, when you are doing laundry and it's time to hang up the clothes, you may decide that figuring out exactly where to hang the black cardigan takes way too much time.

You may need to choose between a quicker routine in the morning when you're getting dressed or a quicker laundry routine.

Let's consider another example to illustrate different ways of grouping. Using the principle of like with like in a kitchen pantry, items could be grouped in any of the following ways:

— Group by food categories (grains together, sauces together, nuts together, etc.)

— Group by meal (breakfast items together, lunch items together, etc.),

— Group by who eats the food

(each roommate's food together, kids' foods together, etc.)

— Group by type of container (cans together, boxes together, packets together, etc.)

Again, there is no one correct way to organize a pantry. The best choice is the one that works for you and that you can maintain.

It's not uncommon for an organizing system to work for a while, but then when something changes, it doesn't work anymore. You might need to classify the items in a different way, or you might just need to rearrange them. As the ages, stages of life, and preferences of people in the home change, those changes may lend themselves to different organizing plans. In our last house, I changed the pantry arrangement several times until I found the one that worked for us. As soon as you figure out that the grouping in a space isn't working for you, try something else. Don't just keep trying to make that same system work.

The principle of grouping like with like extends far beyond just the home environment and physical objects. Digital items can

(and should) also be organized by this principle. It makes sense that you would store a document with the results of a medical procedure in a different place than a document with menu ideas for a holiday party.

Just as physical items can be grouped into physical containers, digital items can be grouped into digital containers like digital folders. One advantage that digital items have in terms of being able to find them is easy searchability.

Although I'm a proponent of digital folders to organize documents, the capacity to easily search for a document can often overcome a lack of order. Email is a good example of this. I might not have placed an important email from a colleague into an appropriate folder. But if I want to find that email, all I have to do is search by that colleague's name or by a keyword to find it.

Another way in which grouping like items is useful is in revealing how many items we own in a particular category. For example, if we put all of our pants together and then group them by color, only then will we realize that we actually have 10 pairs of black pants. As useful as black pants can be, I would argue that no one really needs 10 pairs of them.

Consider also that in any given category, we tend to use 20% of the items 80% of the time (a principle we'll be exploring in a future article). So it's likely that we wear our two favorite pairs of those black pants 80% of the time. Unless you only do laundry very rarely, it's not likely you'll use all 10.

Grouping like with like is a universal and adaptable principle that will serve you well in many areas. Use it in any setting that needs some order, and you'll be thankful you spent the time to do it.

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