

#10) Creating and Using Outlines

We all know about outlines, but most of us don't actually take the time to create them because we think it's just extra work that some English teacher has devised for us. The truth is that if we took the time to create effective outlines before writing our papers, the writing process would go much more smoothly, and our papers would be more successful.

Outlines help us get our ideas in order before we get mired in the desert of the blank "New Document" or the sandpits of unfocused paragraphs. We can establish our purpose for writing, organize our main points, subordinate supporting details, test our logic, and even revise before writing the essay—all of which saves us time in the long run—if we outline effectively.

The following are some important considerations for creating and using outlines.

Before You Start

The working thesis:

It is important to have your topic and your standpoint on that topic (your argument) in mind before you outline. The outline will organize your ideas for *supporting your thesis*. It is also important, however, to remember that your thesis at this point is a "working thesis" and may be modified as you move forward through your outlining and writing process. (If you have not developed a working thesis yet, try some pre-writing activities. Our [handouts](#) on thesis statements and writing about literature can help you with your preliminary planning.)

Defining your purpose:

An outline will help you lay out a plan to meet the needs of your **assignment, audience, and argument**. Look over your assignment sheet to remind yourself of the paper's main goals. Consider who your audience is: How much knowledge about the topic will your reader have? What do you want your reader to get out of your writing, etc.? Also, make sure you consider what it is, exactly, that you want to prove, define, etc. (in other words, *argue*), so that you can design a paper that successfully does so. Establishing these goals will allow you to approach the outline—and then the writing process—more effectively.

Creating an Outline

Different types of outlines for different types of needs:

If the term "outline" conjures up anxiety about how to order Roman numerals, numbers, capitalized letters, lower-case letters, etc., remember that the purpose of an outline—or a *plan*, let's call it here—is to help, not confuse. Create an outline in the way that best suits your individual needs and the needs of the specific writing assignment.

For example, if you are working on a short writing assignment, a **list** of your major points and a brief description of your supporting details for each point could be very helpful:

Thesis: The three-part structure of "To Autumn" allows Keats to show both the distinct phases of autumn and the season's continuity within the larger cycle of nature.

- Briefly define Romantic nature poetry.
- Introduce "To Autumn" (three-part structure).
- 1st stanza: late summer/fruitfulness/Sept.
- 2^d stanza: harvest time/Oct.
- 3^d stanza: end of season/onset of winter/Nov.
- Season's beauty softens the images of death.
- Death and cycle of nature; hints of renewal and return.

(From *The Borzoi Handbook for Writers*, Third Edition, p.31)

Or, if your project is bigger and more complicated, you would probably want to use a more **formal outline** which is useful for organizing and subordinating your ideas, points, and details. In general, subordinating your ideas works like this:

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| <p>Thesis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Subtopic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Supporting idea <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Example or illustration of supporting idea <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Detail for example or illustration B. Supporting idea . . . II. Subtopic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Supporting idea <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.Example <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Detail <p>. . . etc.</p> |
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Notice the “stacking” of information for each subtopic/supporting idea for your thesis. This type of organization will help ensure that each of your paragraphs is focused and developed.

A formal outline can be in either **topic** or **sentence** form. Here are examples of each kind of outline from the *Harbrace College Handbook*, Eleventh Edition, pp.380-1.

Thesis: In my years of driving, I have become aware of three types of drivers who tend to create havoc on the road and have learned to guard against them.

<p>Topic outline: Introduction: The hazardous types of drivers I. Irresponsible drivers A. Unaccountable to other drivers B. Dangerous to other drivers C. Defense: Keep a distance II. Stubborn drivers A. Determined B. Unsafe C. Defense: Don't argue III. Absent-minded drivers A. Heedless of surroundings B. Unaware of their driving C. Defense: Be ready to use the horn Conclusion: Development of awareness of other drivers in order to drive defensively.</p>	<p>Sentence outline: Introduction: There are three types of hazardous drivers on the road. I. Irresponsible drivers refuse to be accountable for the welfare of others. A. They speed through school zones. B. They change lanes heedlessly. C. I have learned to keep a safe distance. II. Stubborn drivers insist on having their own way. A. They drive in the left lane, forcing others to pass on the right. B. They drive slowly, not allowing others to pass. C. I don't try to argue with stubborn drivers. III. Absent-minded drivers are heedless of their surroundings and do not have their minds on what they are doing. A. They are oblivious of other cars. B. They do not use turn signals. C. They change lanes, ignoring other cars. D. I try to be ready to alert them by honking my horn. Conclusion: I have developed an awareness of other drivers and have learned to drive defensively.</p>
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Notice that both outlines address the same thesis and conclusion and represent the same organizational plan, but the topic outline uses brief wording to point out *parallelism* while the sentence outline reveals complete thoughts. The **topic outline** is especially useful for organizing **logic in a balanced way** because the focus is on parallelism (note the obvious patterns in the example). The **sentence outline** helps you **think through your ideas** more thoroughly, and the **sentences can actually be used in your paper** (for example, the major ideas listed with the Roman numerals can actually serve as your topic sentences in your essay).

Using Your Outline

Revising before you even start writing: Another great benefit from creating an outline before you start writing your paper is how you can use it to anticipate organization and/or logic problems—in other words, you can actually *revise* your paper before you even write it!

Princeton University's Writing Center has this advice about how to use your outline:

As you look at your outline, ask yourself if this condensed version of your paper clearly expresses your central idea. You can judge the development of your argument by checking how easily and successfully you were able to restate the main point of each part of your argument or paragraph. You should also check to see that each point you make contributes to your argument by advancing your line of thinking, presenting evidence, or interpreting data. As you look at your paper in light of your outline, don't be afraid to go back and cut sections that are redundant or don't fit. Your paper may be shorter, but it will also be better because your focus will be clearer. Just as often, however, outlines reveal gaps—missing evidence, fuzzy arguments—as well as redundancies and irrelevancies.

http://web.princeton.edu/sites/writing/Writing_Center/handouts/html/Revision.htm

So, before you start writing, you can decide whether you need to **add or cut** supporting information and examples, and whether **reorganization** would make your paper flow more logically for the reader. You may also, at this point, be able to see if your **“working thesis”** still clearly states what you plan to discuss in your paper. Making adjustments at this point in your writing process will save you time and headache later.

First Outline:

Thesis: Our university should invest in more parking spaces.

Paragraph 1:

- Attention-getting opening.
- State thesis.

Paragraph 2:

- Discuss benefits of parking and how the cost to build parking can be met.

Paragraph 3:

- Discuss problems from not having more parking.

Paragraph 4:

- Conclude.

Notice that the revised outline includes a more developed thesis that takes into consideration the other revisions made.

Note that the information from the second paragraph has been split to form two subtopics (how to meet the costs and the overall benefits).

Also notice that the revised outline shows a re-organization of the subtopics so that the problems are discussed first, the solution next, and then a summary of the benefits—an order that increases the “persuasive effect” of the argument.

Revised Outline:

Thesis: Investing in more parking spaces will positively affect both the educational experience of the students and the financial income of the university.

Paragraph 1:

- Description of student late for class because of lack of parking.
- State Thesis.

Paragraph 2:

- Discuss problems that result from parking shortage.

Paragraph 3:

- Discuss how costs of new parking can be paid for.

Paragraph 4:

- Discuss all the benefits of more parking.

Paragraph 5:

- Conclude.

The bottom line with all these suggestions is that effective outlining will result in a *more effective essay*—and will actually *save* you time in the long run.