

Outline Structure

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how to use an outline to move into the drafting stage of the writing process with control and intent. You'll also explore how this stage strengthens your communication skill. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Outlines and Drafts in the Writing Process

As you may know, a draft is an individual iteration of an essay or other piece of writing. One thing that experienced writers assume about their writing process is that multiple drafts are a fact of life, at least if they want to get anywhere close to meeting their potential.

Thus, writers tend to view an **outline** as the beginning of a longer and more productive process, as well as a transition into the **drafting** stage.



HINT

Think of the outline as a map telling you where to go next. If you have a map, it's harder to get lost, and it's less likely that you'll be delayed by an obstacle like writer's block.

However, it's important not to think of your outline as set in stone. It's not a contract, but more like a mental guide. As with everything else in the writing process, you're in charge of the outline. If you ever feel the need to add, cut, or rearrange something in your outline, do it.

Remember that your outline, as well as later drafts of the essay itself, should always be driven by the working thesis, which itself can be changed throughout the writing process.



Communication: Skill Tip

As with most skills, the more you practice, the more you improve. By continuing to outline and draft papers, you will continually improve your writing skills, and thus, your communication skill. It may be difficult at first, especially if you're doing it correctly, however, you will find that your written communication becomes stronger as you continue practicing.



TERMS TO KNOW

Outline

The prewritten plan for an essay or other piece of writing that generally includes a working thesis, the primary ideas to be discussed, and the planned structural organization.

Drafting

The act of composing a piece of writing.

2. Using an Outline

Now that we're a little more clear about what an outline is, let's look at how using one can help you proceed through the writing process, through drafting and revision.

IN CONTEXT

Suppose you are working on an essay about dress codes. For the purpose of this hypothetical essay, let's say your argument is going to be that dress codes in the workplace should be abolished. A bare-bones outline of this essay might look something like this:

1. Businesses should do away with dress codes.
 - a. Buying specific clothes can be expensive.
 - b. Employees would be happier choosing their clothes.
 - c. Happy employees are more productive.
2. Types of jobs that should not require dress codes:
 - a. Office staff
 - b. Delivery drivers
 - c. Retail workers
3. Conclusion: Businesses without dress codes would be happier more productive places.
 - a. Call to action to remove dress codes

What do you notice? Besides the fact that it's necessarily brief and doesn't use complete sentences, it looks like a fairly thorough set of notes, right? It's a map of where you want to go with the essay, including the three main points you want to make. It begins with the thesis about how businesses should do away with dress codes, followed by some examples to make the topic real for your readers.

Next is an exploration into possible jobs that could remove dress codes.



HINT

Not all writers do this, but sometimes when writing an outline, it's helpful to include material like this—subjects or side arguments that you're not completely sure are necessary for your argument, but that you don't want to forget. As you're writing, you may find a good way to include this piece of information, or you may not. Remember that this is your outline, not something you absolutely have to follow. Therefore, it's fine to include options like this.

Finally, the last planned section includes a call to action for businesses to remove dress codes.

The chances are very good that as you actually begin to write your first draft, you'll find that, for instance, you

need to do much more work in the first section in order to convince your intended audience that dress codes are really that bad, and that they're worth writing and reading about. Therefore, one thing you might end up doing is borrowing some of the material you'd intended to use at the end in order to front-load your argument about why this matters.

This is absolutely fine. Just because you write an outline one way doesn't mean it is set in stone. After all, part of the reason you take a map on a journey is so you'll have multiple options when it comes to reaching your destination!

3. Preventing Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a subject that you're likely familiar with, at least vaguely. In an academic context, plagiarism involves presenting someone else's ideas or writing as your own, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Regardless of the intention, this behavior is considered unethical, and sometimes even illegal. Intentional, or deliberate, plagiarism generally incurs some punitive reaction from a teacher or educational institution. Unintentional plagiarism comes about when a careless writer fails to give credit to whoever first came up with the idea or work that's been taken.

It's important to address plagiarism in this discussion because having an original outline and original working thesis will help prevent both types of plagiarism.

If students, or any writers for that matter, have an outline and a working thesis, they will have already clearly expressed and organized their ideas in their own words, and will therefore be less likely to unintentionally take another's ideas or words as their own.

Also, if writers have done their due diligence in the prewriting stage, there will generally be less incentive to take another's ideas or words intentionally. After all, they'll have already done half the work, right?



TERM TO KNOW

Plagiarism

The presentation of another person's ideas or writing as your own, either intentionally or unintentionally.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the relationship between **outlines and drafts in the writing process**. Outlines provide direction and structure for an essay, so writers can benefit from **using an outline** to move into early and later drafts. You also learned how using an outline can help **prevent plagiarism**, both intentional and unintentional. Because outlines encourage writers to put their ideas in their own words early on, plagiarism may be less likely to occur later in the writing process. Finally, you explored how outline and drafting strengthens your **communication skill**.

Best of luck in your learning!



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Plagiarism

The presentation of another person's ideas or writing as your own, either intentionally or unintentionally.