

Outlines and Drafting

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of outlines and drafting. We will discuss an overview of what outlines and drafts are, and will explore ways to use an outline to move into the drafting step of the writing process with control and intent. We will also discuss how outlines can prevent plagiarism.

Our discussion breaks down as follows:

1. Outlines: An Overview
2. Using an Outline
3. Plagiarism

1. Outlines: An Overview

Before we begin the discussion about outlines, let's clarify what is meant in composition by the word "draft." **Draft** means an individual iteration of an essay or other piece of writing, as in one version, or one way to say it. It is not, by any means, *the* way to say it. 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.



TERM TO KNOW

Draft

An individual iteration of an essay or other piece of writing.

Thus, writers tend to think of prewriting and outlines -- as well as how they transition into an early draft -- as simply the beginning of a longer and, ultimately, more productive process.



HINT

Remember that as a writer, the writing process is under your control. All the things discussed here are tips and tricks -- ways that experienced writers have found to get the most out of their time. They are not, however, things that you or any writer absolutely has to do. Make the writing process *your* process!

One of the best ways to make the writing process your process is to use prewriting techniques like outlines to help you write your first draft and later revisions.



Think of the outline as a map telling you where to go next. If you've got a map, it's harder to get lost, and it's less likely that you'll be hung up by some 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, and like everything else in the writing process, you're in charge. So if you ever feel the need to add, to cut, or to 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.

2. Using an Outline

Now that we're a little more clear about what an outline is and is not, let's look at how using one can help you proceed through the writing process, through drafting and revision. Suppose you are working on an essay about fake plants. For the purpose of this hypothetical essay, let's say your argument is going to be that fake plants are worse than no plants, because all they do is remind people that the living room, the store, or the restaurant that they're in doesn't have any plants in it. A bare bones outline of this essay might look something like this.

1. Fake plants worse than no plants

- remind us what's missing (diner example with dust).
- token gestures that discourage real effort (indoor plants at restaurant).

2. Types of & situations with fake plants

- stores, restaurants, public buildings, living rooms?
- include fake tree cell towers or no?

3. Conclusion: make real gestures in life, not simulacra

- appeal to notice fake plants, to not use them, or to at least use them knowing what's really going on.

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 for where you want to go with the essay, including the three main points you want to make. It begins with the thesis about how fake plants are worse than no plants, followed by some examples to make the topic real for your readers.

Next is an exploration into the most common situations in which people encounter fake plants, and all the associations therein. There is also a note in this section, asking whether or not to include a discussion about fake tree cellphone towers. Not all writers do this, but sometime 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 it, or perhaps you could use a little more material to work with. Remember, this is your outline, not something you absolutely have to follow. Therefore, it's fine to include options like this.

Finally is the last planned section, in which there is a call to action for people to live a life of real gestures, to have plants or to not have plants, but either way to do it consciously.

Now, the chances are very good that as you actually begin to write your first draft, you'll find, for example, that you need to do much more work in the first section in order to convince your intended audience that fake plants 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 -- the whole part about living a life of real gestures, and how that is implicitly a much bigger argument, one that stretches far beyond the realm of plastic indoor plants.

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 that you'll have multiple options when it comes to getting to your destination!

3. Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a subject that you're likely familiar with, at least passingly. In an academic context, plagiarism means presenting someone else's ideas or writing as your own, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Both of these two types are cheating in an academic context, and are generally considered unethical, or sometimes 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 phrase that's been taken.

It's important to address plagiarism in this discussion because having an original outline, and an 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 they've done due diligence in their prewriting, there will generally be less need and less incentive to be tempted to take another's ideas or words intentionally. After all, they'll have already done half the work, right?



SUMMARY

Today we learned what an outline is, and how outlines and drafting work together. We learned how to use an outline to move into the first and later drafts of an essay. Lastly, we learned how using an outline can help prevent both types of plagiarism, intentional and unintentional.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall



TERMS TO KNOW

Draft

An individual iteration of an essay or other piece of writing.