

245W: Outlining and reverse-outliningⁱ

Instructors often ask students to hand in outlines for longer writing assignment before handing in an actual draft. This is because outlining helps writers organize their thoughts and arguments. Think of an outline as a point/counter-point debate with yourself. Your outline should be a concise representation of what points and counter-points towards your thesis you have found in your readings so far.

Outlines are an effective and often efficient writing tool, but many writers find the act of drawing up an outline somewhat artificial and even restraining. These writers find that the act of writing itself helps the ideas to flow, and find themselves formulating arguments and theses as they write. If you fall into the second group, you can take advantage of outlines through reverse-outlining. In order to reverse-outline, you will need to have some writing done already. (If you are already working from an outline, the following exercise will still be useful to ensure you are following your outline in your summary of argument.)

Start by writing a brief but focused collective summary/critique of all the relevant articles you have chosen to include in your bibliography. If you find that you feel inclined to write about one article, then a second, then a third, stop and group the articles into two or more different general ideas or theses they represent. Instead of writing about the different articles, write about the different ideas they stand for. In addition, if you find yourself going into detail about any specific point, stop and move on to the next article or point. At this stage, it is more important for you to cover enough material broadly than to cover any specific material in depth.

Once you've written about each of your articles in hand, go through your writing sentence by sentence. Most of your sentences will fall into one of two functional categories: topic vs. detail. Your topic sentences are those that make points or statements; they are essential to your overall argument. For instance, let's look at the following opening paragraph from Chinsamy and Plagányi (2008; citations removed):

It is well recognized by scientists that evolution is the unifying theme that underlies the biological sciences. Based on the considerable leaps in our understanding of how evolution works, from both experimental and theoretical work, Kennedy proposed "Evolution in Action" as the major scientific breakthrough of the year 2005. But despite scientific advances in evolutionary biology, evolution is often seen as contentious and "troubling". This is because evolutionary biology intersects and often challenges religious beliefs and values, which lead to an intellectual and spiritual dilemma. Thus, diplomacy and discussion become key in smoothing the interface between science and society.

I have italicized the topic sentences. The other sentences are in the paragraph to support the topic sentences by providing details; they are essentially disposable. For example, the paragraph above reads perfectly fine without the detail sentences:

It is well recognized by scientists that evolution is the unifying theme that underlies the biological sciences. But despite scientific advances in evolutionary biology, evolution is often seen as contentious and “troubling”.

Identify your topic sentences and arrange them in a list. This should leave you with something that more or less resembles an outline. The list of topic sentences you’ve created is your reverse-outline.

Your next step is to read through your reverse-outline and see if your listed topic sentences or “items” work cohesively together, and in order. Do they create a point/counter-point narrative that culminates at your conclusion, or are there any missing points? Are your items in a logical order, or do you need to move things around to improve the structure of your argument? Does each item have sufficient support? Once you have a reverse-outline, it is much easier to see if you need to add or subtract any points, or need to work on your organization in your draft. Keep revising not only the draft but also your outline. Outlines can be great tools to keep you on track during the writing process.

References

Chinsamy, A., and É. Plagányi. 2008. Accepting evolution. *Evolution* 62(1):248–254.

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