



## OUTLINES

### **Outlining Before, During, and After You Write**

Many writers outline before they write, but also as they write and after they've completed a draft. Not only can you outline at any point in your writing, outlines don't have to fit the kind of formula (heading, sub-heading, sub-sub-heading) that you learned in eighth grade. An outline is basically an organized list of your main points. If you make an outline before you write, it can work as a blueprint of how you want to construct your argument. If you make an outline of a finished draft, it can function as an x-ray that helps you see the structure of your argument clearly. Such an outline will help you be more objective about your writing, and enable you to judge whether your paper actually captures what you intended to say.

### **Using Outlines to Reorganize**

An outline can be a quick and effective tool to rearrange a paper that's badly disorganized. If you think the structure of your paper is unclear or confused, try writing an outline of your ideas either based on what you've actually written or on the ideal shape you'd like your paper to have. If you can produce an outline whose structure makes sense, then you can revise by shifting parts of your draft to correspond to the outline. In other words, the outline can give shape to the writing you've already done. If the outline is clear and coherent, the paper that will result from your adding, deleting, or moving parts should also be coherent. This process may lead you to discover that there are outline headings that don't correspond to anything in your paper, in which case you'll know what you have to write next. You may also find that there is material left over in your paper that doesn't fit anywhere in the outline, in which case you'll know what you have to throw out.

### **Use Full Sentences When You Outline**

Writing down the main points in your paper in full sentences is one of the best ways to create a useful outline. Merely writing headings is too vague if you are trying to clarify your thoughts because an outline isn't just a list of the things in your paper; it ought to reveal the *structure* of the paper. That is, it ought to show what the thesis is, what the argument for that thesis is, how one thought or line of reasoning leads to another, and how the parts of the argument work together to give the reader a reason for believing that the thesis has merit. If you are making an outline before you start to write, using complete sentences will get you started writing and expressing your ideas coherently. If you are creating an outline after you've composed a draft, writing full sentences will help you to see—in a way that a word or a phrase cannot—where your ideas are weak or unfocused, and where your discussion strays from your central idea.

### **Related Writing Center Handouts**

Abstracts  
Developing an Argument  
Revision

© 1999 Princeton Writing Program