

OUTLINES

Outlines: Insight and Opportunity for Prewriting, Drafting, and Revising

Many writers have different preferences for getting started with a new writing assignment. Some writers prefer to approach a topic via various prewriting strategies, such as freewriting, looping, listing, and clustering, while other writers prefer to begin with an outline of words, ideas, categories, or even full sentences to be considered as the initial main ideas or supporting points for the first draft. When writers are uncertain about how to approach an assignment or when they need to determine what ideas they do have for a topic, then prewriting strategies are usually a better choice than outlines. However, once the prewriting stage is complete, some writers forget or are unaware of the benefits to using an outline as a vital link or bridge between each stage of the writing process.

Using an outline between each stage of the writing process – Prewriting, Drafting, and Revising – can help writers

- to inventory ideas and give boundary and form to the ideas discovered in prewriting
- to determine the interrelationship between ideas as they develop
- to inventory ideas and needs as they develop in multiple drafts
- to organize ideas for logical structure and chronology
- to verify connections between supporting points and the thesis
- to verify connections between supporting points and evidence/examples
- to verify opportunities for paragraph development (MEAL Plan), and
- to verify audience needs and analysis

This is the concept of the “working outline,” how an outline is updated to record changes between each stage of the writing process. Rather than conceiving of an outline merely as the final representation of the content and organization of a final paper, writers need to be aware of how outlines can “work” throughout the writing process to provide opportunities to discover the strengths and weaknesses in focus, development, and organization.

Outline after Prewriting

Once a prewriting strategy has been used, a working outline can be used to inventory and give boundary and form to the ideas discovered in prewriting. Without a working outline, many writers struggle to assess the relationship and interrelationship between ideas by going directly from prewriting to the first draft. To avoid this confusion, writers should follow these steps after prewriting:

1. Identify all the ideas discovered in the prewriting (circling or underlining specific words, phrases or full sentences), and notate any additional comments or clarifications in the margins.
2. Record each of these words, phrases, full sentences or notes into an informal list or inventory of ideas.

3. Assess the interrelationship among ideas and any common themes shared among words, phrases, full sentences or notes.
4. Reorganize and revise the content to build focus between all items included.
5. Create a working outline that identifies each supporting point and any initial examples discovered to support these points. (Writers unfamiliar with the organizing an outline should review the **Developing an Outline** handout for clarification.)

Once this working outline is complete, writers will have a better opportunity to organize and focus the main ideas and supporting points in the first draft.

Outline between Drafts

Once the first draft has been completed, a new working outline can be used to inventory the ideas that have developed and to assess any opportunities to improve focus, development, and organization. First, create a reverse outline of the current draft. (Writers unfamiliar with the concept of reverse outlining should see the **Reverse Outlining** handout for clarification.) Second, follow these steps to create a new, revised working outline based on the content provided in the reverse outline:

1. Identify and notate the current working thesis statement, and determine whether or not it provides a direct response to the assignment (that it is on-topic).
2. Identify and notate the essential MEAL Plan components for each paragraph (Main Ideas or topic sentences, then the sub-points for Evidence/Examples).
3. Identify and notate any new ideas or supporting points that have surfaced in the latest draft.
4. Determine if all supporting points (topic sentences) connect to the current thesis (MEAL Plan) and to the topic question or assignment.
5. Identify and notate (briefly or in full sentence) each piece of evidence used to develop the main idea of each paragraph, being careful to note where the evidence is currently located or is needed (MEAL Plan).
6. Determine the relevance of evidence provided to support each paragraph's main idea and any sub-points, and determine the relevance of the evidence as direct support for the thesis.
7. Determine if the current organizational pattern within each paragraph is in the best order or in the order most effective to achieve the purpose of each paragraph (to inform, persuade, or argue, or to accomplish a particular mode of development).
8. Determine if the current organizational pattern of all body paragraphs is in the best order or the order most effective to support the thesis (what does your audience need to know and in what order?).

Remember: After each draft, and on through to the final revision, writers should continually update the current working outline to reflect the progress and direction of each paragraph in the current draft.

Outlines are not simply meant to provide the content and organization of a final paper; outlines can play a vital role in providing writers with focus and direction through each stage of the writing process.