

College Writing: An Outline of Outlines

You simply can't write without an outline. No, seriously. For one thing, how else do you know when you're done? Whether we structure it the way our English Teacher taught us, or just hold it in our heads, we outline. This article takes a bird's eye view of a great outline.

1. Xxxxxx
 - a. Xxxxxx
 - b. Xxxxxx
 - i. ...never mind all this!

We're grownups now, and usually we have no need for formality in the outline we work from. Who has enough time to write both the formal outline AND the piece itself, anyway?

But don't think you can write anything from a blog to a novel without an outline in mind. It can't be done. How much attention you should give to the outline depends on the answers to three questions:

- How **COMPLICATED** is the bite you are taking from your subject? Use the outlining process as your 'think time'. Write a very detailed outline, and then discuss it with another knowledgeable person to be as sure as possible that you are going to write what you mean to write.
- How **IMPORTANT** is the piece to your grade or career? This goes without saying – when the stakes are high, invest the time to outline **EVERY** section.
- How **LONG** will the piece be? The longer the final product, the more detail you should have in the outline. Keeping your work 'tight' is one of the marks of good writing. 'Tight' simply means on-topic and moving forward without too much side- and back-tracking. After six chapters it is **FAR TOO EASY** to lose your way. Your outline will keep you from wandering off into the 'woods' and being eaten by some big bad 'wolf'.

So now we get to the outline itself. Where to start, you ask? Easy! With the four questions **EVERY** piece of writing **MUST** answer. Each of the following sections might be a sentence or two, a paragraph or two, a page or two or a chapter or two – the length depends on the overall piece you are creating. You can rearrange if you have a good reason to, but you are safe attacking them in this order:



1. Why should I CARE?

This usually comes first. If you don't have a good answer to this in your mind, you might as well stop writing. To be honest, when I read a book, fiction or non-fiction, if I am not engaged in the first few pages, I NEVER read the rest.

A reader might be enticed to care about one of several different things:

- a. Your topic
- b. Your Point of View
- c. Your promise of information
- d. Your expertise
- e. Your characters

2. What has been done/said by others on the topic?

Academic writers do a 'literature search'. Fiction writers use 'allusions'. These help orient the reader, give your piece some veracity, and show that you have done your homework and read what those before you have written. In this article, for example, I've given a nod to High School English teachers everywhere.

3. What are you adding to the topic?

This is where you write/tell/espouse your topic. THIS is where you let us know whatever it was you set pen to paper to accomplish.

4. Now what?

You had some reason to start the piece to begin with – here is where you nail it! Your reader should think something, do something, read something, write something, feel something. Make sure they know what that 'something' is.

This article only scratches the surface of outlining, but if you start with these four main sections in mind you will see immediately how your writing goes faster, with much better results.

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