

Mastering the Essay

Lesson 2 – Outlining as Thinking & Body Paragraphs

READINGS

- “The Good Schoolmaster” by Thomas Fuller
- **Writing an Outline**
- **Paragraphs** (UNC Chapel Hill)

OUTLINES

- Most students think of outlines as extraneous hoops to jump through, but outlines are really the "laboratory" in which you test and refine your argument before putting all the work into a full essay. It is much easier to revise a skeletal outline than it is to fundamentally change your argument in a full paper if you realize you are wrong or your reasoning is weak—and remember, honest essay writing is as much about testing the truth of your ideas as it is articulating a compelling argument to your reader.
 - A good outline does a lot for you: 1) It helps you identify and fix weaknesses in your argument. 2) It helps you organize your ideas and make sure that you are presenting them in the best, most logical and compelling order. 3) It saves you time because completely taking apart and revising a whole paper is very time consuming.
- There are a few different kinds of outlines that are appropriate in different situations: If you are writing a long paper for a class with a required, submitted outline, you will want to write a **detailed formal outline** (Oxford style, includes topics, major claims, major evidence). If you are writing a quick in-class essay for an exam, you may want to pencil out a **brief, bullet-point outline** focusing on the order of claims.
- Another kind of outline is a "**thumbnail**" outline. This kind is extremely helpful for those early stages of planning your argument: it focuses on claims alone. When an artist paints a mural or a large painting, she will first make a series of small "thumbnail sketches" which plan the major elements. Similarly, a thumbnail outline includes only the **theses** and the supporting **sub-theses** (the claim of each paragraph which supports the thesis. When you write a thumbnail outline, you are first of all checking to make sure that each sub-thesis directly supports the thesis, that the argument is complete (not leaving out any important steps), and in the correct order.
- Always write some kind of an outline before you write any essay (even quick, exam essays). Your teacher/reader will always know if you have skipped this step. Trust me
- Some students worry that creating an outline will stifle their creativity, or lock them into an idea they don't like. Remember that outlines are written in jelly, not stone. They can be changed to whatever will help you most. They are tools, not chains. Outlines can and *should* change as you write.
 - **Outline as a tool for revision:** In fact, returning to the outline after your first draft is an essential tool of revision. Inevitably, the essay will not

match the outline perfectly. When revising, create a new outline that reflects the actual essay that you wrote and check it to make sure your argument is complete and ordered well.

- Take a look at Thomas Fuller's essay—what would an outline of his argument look like? What is the "job" of each paragraph (intro, body, transition, summary, conclusion, etc.)? How are the paragraphs related? How does the idea of each paragraph transition into the next?

BODY PARAGRAPHS

- The body paragraphs are where the meat of your argument happens in your essay. You can think of each body paragraph as its own little "mini-essay" which makes and proves its own claim which in turn proves the thesis. Each body paragraph needs to have its own claim or **sub-thesis** which directly proves the overall **thesis** of the paper. Each body paragraph includes multiple pieces of **evidence** proving that **sub-thesis** and the evidence is always thoroughly **explained**. The three most fundamental parts of a body paragraph, then, are 1) sub-thesis, 2) evidence, 3) explanation. Ask students what are some of the common traps people might fall into when composing body paragraphs, and strategies someone could use to avoid them. Students are often eager to give advice, so avoid asking them what they do wrong and how they can fix it, and instead frame it around things that "people often do."
- **The two cardinal rules of body paragraphs:**
 1. Every single sentence **MUST** be there because it helps to show the thesis is true. It is not enough to be interesting or related in some way. It must directly back up the thesis.
 2. Never assume that a piece of evidence or quotation speaks for itself—always follow it up with a sentence or two analyzing it/showing how it backs up your point.
- How do opposing arguments fit into the model of body paragraph we are talking about, since everything in each paragraph must support the thesis, and opposing arguments seemingly don't?

Assignment

This week and next, you will work on turning your Summa-style argument into a real essay. Your assignment this week is to create **two outlines** for the rough draft of the essay you will write next week. **First**, write a **thumbnail outline** which includes only the overall thesis and the sub-theses for the body paragraphs. Make sure you have included all the necessary, logical steps and that they are in the correct order. Then, write a **detailed, Oxford-style**, detailed outline fleshing out how you plan to write your essay. Include a brief indication of what kind of evidence you think you will need. The detailed outline should be between $\frac{3}{4}$ of a page and $1\frac{1}{2}$ pages.

Consult the sample outline document on the course page for examples (remembering to use complete sentences for your outline).