

Decomposition: the outline

Outlines can work effectively as organizational devices. This is true, but only to a limited extent: making an outline of a composition before writing it is often counterproductive—especially if you are inventing as you go along! Too often, “outlining” becomes just another hoop to jump through (with index cards, getting three sources, etc).

Generally speaking, outlines work better if integrated into the process of invention and arrangement—if they are used to organize existing writing.

Process

1. Take notes on the text you’re trying to improve: one or two sentences per paragraph, at the most, so that you have a running summary of what the text is saying.
2. Make an outline from that summary, as is. Don’t “correct” the outline or try to make it 100% organized and pretty; just make a record of the writing as it now stands. If you see large hierarchical structures in the writing, put them in the outline.
3. From that outline, write a one paragraph description of the argument. Don’t worry about what you want it to be: write out what it is. (If you’re working on your own writing, sometimes it’s good to get someone else to help with this.)
4. Write a one paragraph description of what you want the argument to be, if you’re not happy with its current state. Or just make a few notes about what needs improvement.
5. Note on the outline, with highlighter or something, any points that you think are particularly effective and want to keep. Note any quotations you use that should stay.
6. Are any arguments repeated in the outline of the current document? Make a note of those as well, to consider grouping them in the new outline.
7. Look for divisions: if the argument goes into detail on a certain subject, that could be a top-level heading in your new outline.
8. Finally, note any points which work effectively as introductions (showing how an issue is *kairotic*, or providing basic information about a subject, or a nice punchy start) or conclusions (a point that has a nice finality, or a way to connect the argument back to the introduction).
9. Start making the new outline. Begin with any points you see as the introduction and conclusion. Place divided points sequentially. Read your description of what you want the argument to do a few times as you arrange the arguments.
10. Imagine rewriting based on the new outline: does it seem like it’ll work? Make any changes if needed. Set the new outline aside—the next day, you’ll be ready to rewrite!

Tips

- Don’t worry about the “you have to have B if you have A” rule—subdivide whatever way you want.
- As you begin to rewrite, don’t use outlines rigidly: they are designed to help organize material, not to constrain you. If you feel you’ve found a better way that “contradicts” your outline, that’s just fine. (Change the outline to meet the paper, not the reverse!)
- For any project larger than a page or so, spread this process over a few days.
- While outlining on paper can be useful, outlining on the computer is often much more productive, since it’s a lot easier to reorganize points, change subordination, and revise as you go along. (The outline tool in OpenOffice is fantastic.)