

# 3. USING OUTLINES TO SUPPORT THE WRITING PROCESS

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“Writing and performing should deepen the meaning of words, should illuminate, transfix and transform.”

The time has come. It is time to write. Your professor’s deadline looms terribly close, and you have yet to begin your essay. You stare at the blank screen, nervous, and overwhelmed. Your writing materials surround you – books, articles, lectures, data, and class notes. However, no matter how hard you try, you do not know where to begin. This scenario befalls students each semester. Despite their best intentions, they struggle to produce well-polished essays worthy of that highly coveted “A.” Often due to this stress, rather than submit a paper that has been edited several times, students submit their first draft, because, like many of us, writer’s block is a real thing. However, you can stop this cycle by adopting the practice of using an outline. A well-developed outline helps you organize your ideas and highlights the relationship between the various components of your paper. It can contain full sentences, or utilize a series of bullet points that illustrate the direction and scope of your essay.

According to the Perdue University Online Writing Center (2020), before settling in to developing an outline, it is important to consider a few key ideas.

- First, what is the purpose of your paper? Throughout your academic career you will create essays that address a range of topics and

themes. Further, each paper will have a different purpose (i.e. inform, persuade, argue, or analyze). For example, in a sociological theory course, you may have to develop a paper that argues for or against the ideas of a social theorist (e.g. argue in favor of Marx’s theory of alienation as it relates to the post-modern work experience, or, argue against Durkheim’s views on religion as it relates to post-modern society).

- Second, you will need to consider your audience. To whom will you target your narrative? It is not uncommon for instructors to identify a specific target audience. For example, your instructor may ask you to direct your narrative to government leadership such as Congress, or a grantor such as the National Science Foundation. It is important for you to thoughtfully consider what the audience already knows, and how your narrative will support, or promote further understanding of this topic—as well as the level of knowledge and expertise such an audience has.

- Third, you will need to develop a strong thesis statement before creating an outline. The thesis statement guides your work, and focuses your intention. Let’s return to the paper that argues in favor of Marx’s theory of alienation as it applies to the post-modern workplace. A sample thesis statement could be: Workers in

America's meat-packing plants experience alienated labor due to exploitative practices. According to Kepka (2020) a strong thesis statement, should show specificity, precision, the ability to be argued, the ability to be demonstrated, forcefulness, and confidence. Notice that the thesis statement focuses specifically on workers in the meat packing industry, speaks precisely to exploitative practices, and can clearly be demonstrated. In addition, the author doesn't waffle. The author speaks with clarity and confidence.

Now that your paper has a solid direction, it is time to build an outline. Think of your outline as a scaffold, a sturdy platform that allows the author to move from abstract ideas to specific examples with ease. According to the Perdue University Online Writing Lab (2020) a well-developed outline does the following:

- Aids in the writing process
- Organizes ideas
- Presents material in a logical form
- Identifies relationships among ideas
- Provides an ordered overview of your writing
- Helps to define boundaries and groups

Generally, an outline moves from the abstract to the specific using a select ordering process such as, roman numerals, letters, or numbers. The outline will indicate the major points within the essay, which reflect, "the building blocks of your paper...each major point should be a clear claim that relates to the central argument of the paper" (Walden University Writing Center 2020). Minor points, or subtopics, help "develop the nuances of your major points..." (Walden University Writing Center 2020). Magher (2020) further suggests that an outline will help you to do the following:

- Clarify your thoughts and develop ideas
- Identify weaknesses in an argument
- Organize ideas to stay on target
- Save time!

Magher (2020) notes that "once a complete outline is written, the actual project will mostly involve expanding and connecting the ideas together so they flow from one to the next, and, when writing research papers, adding citations and references where necessary." Now that we know what an outline is and how it functions in the writing process, let's take a look at an example of a well-developed outline.

Assignment: Argue in favor of Marx's theory of alienation as it applies to the post-modern workplace.

Thesis Statement: *Workers in America's meat-packing plants experience alienated labor due to exploitative practices.*

Outline:

- I. Introduction: Provide an overview of the essay and introduce the thesis statement.
- II. Meat-Packing Industry's Historical Problems with Exploitative Practices (Background information)
  - A. Meat-Packing plants become a powerful force in the economy
  - B. Historical and Present-day lawsuits against the Meat-Packing Industry
  - C. Meat-Packing during the global pandemic

- III. Marx's Views on Exploited Populations and the Reserve Labor Force (Apply one theoretical concept to issue at hand)
  - A. Experiences of women in the meat-packing industry
  - B. Experiences of Latinx workers in the meat-packing industry
  - C. Experiences of African-American workers in the meat-packing industry
- IV. Marx's Views on Alienation: Separation from the Product and the Process of Labor (Apply second theoretical concept to issue at hand)
  - A. America's demand for meat products and its effect on working conditions
  - B. The routinization of assembly-line work and its effect on workers
  - C. Crowded and unsanitary working conditions
- V. Marx's Views on Alienation: Separation from Species-Being and Fellow Workers (Apply third theoretical concept to issue at hand)
  - A. Feelings of demoralization among America's meat-packing workers
  - B. Lack of creativity and autonomy in assembly-line work
  - C. Management's attempts to suppress unionization
- VI. Conclusion: Reiterate major points and generate suggestions for further research.

The above outline presents the author with a solid base to begin creating a well-developed paper. Keep in mind that as your writing skills mature, your instructors expect that your writing will evolve beyond the typical five paragraph essay. Rather than think of each major point as a paragraph, think of each major

point as a section that requires elaboration, and often some refinement. For example, let's examine how Major Point #2: Marx's Views on Exploited Populations and the Reserve Labor Force may develop as your research progresses:

- III. Marx's Views on Exploited Populations and the Reserve Labor Force
  - A. Experiences of women in the meat-packing industry
  - B. Experiences of Latinx workers in the meat-packing industry
  - C. Lack of workers' rights protection for undocumented workers
  - D. Wages and long work hours
  - E. Specific example: High reliance on undocumented workers at chicken plants
  - F. Experiences of African-American workers in the meat-packing industry

Notice that as the author's outline develops, the section on Latinx workers expounds on the experiences of undocumented workers. At this point, the author may want to focus heavily on the exploitative conditions of undocumented

workers within several paragraphs, and discuss the experiences of other groups within one paragraph. In addition, notice that the section on Latinx workers moves from a general discussion about worker's rights to a more

specific discussion about experiences with poultry plants specifically. Keep in mind that your outline will change as your research changes, and your writing progresses.

How do you know that your outline is ready to go? The best advice is to rely on another set of eyes that will help you identify any major gaps, or areas that do not connect with your overall theme. If allowed, share your outline with your instructor. Avoid sharing an outline that only contains a few bullet points, or a few sentences. Use the above example as a template, and provide as much information as possible. The more substantive the outline; the more substantive the feedback. You can also share your work with your peers. They may recall a part of the assignment that you missed, or will have great ideas on how to improve the focus and/or direction of your paper. The next time you have to write a formal essay, try using an outline. It will help to organize your thoughts, and help you create a well-polished paper.

## REFERENCES

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