
MEMORANDUM

Re: Sentence Outlines
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From: M. O'Hare
Date: January 10, 2013

I regularly recommend a sentence outline as the first stage of writing. I haven't had time to flesh out this memo explaining the idea, but here's the outline I will develop it from:

I. Introduction [*this is one of only two sections you may title with a word*]

II. A sentence outline is the framework of a paper

- A. It is just like the ordinary outline you learned in grade school except that
 - 1. It accepts only full sentences as entries
 - 2. It consequently shows a logical structure
- B. You might *write* the paper by treating each entry as the topic sentence of a paragraph.
- C. In any case, you should treat the outline as the paper itself at every stage; write the paper by expanding the outline, not in a separate document (see III.C).
- D. Don't get carried away outlining: when it gets to about a seventh of the final paper's length, stop and start expanding it into prose.

III. A sentence outline has three great virtues

- A. You commit yourself to an argument right away
 - 1. You can see if your planned scheme will be persuasive.
 - 2. Since it's only an outline, you can change it without throwing away lots of prose.
- B. It is useful for collaboration and criticism at any stage
 - 1. When deadlines change, you have something to show at any time
 - a. to your boss
 - b. to a client
 - 2. You can get advice from colleagues early, when it's useful.
- C. It guides your work efficiently

When you have a complete outline, even a sketchy one, you can start writing at any point because you know what the reader will have already seen, and you also know what following material needs groundwork. Usually, it's best to leave the beginning of a paper, especially the introduction, for last (if only because you don't know what you need to introduce until it's written) so you don't waste a lot of time trampling the grass and "softening up" the reader for an argument you aren't sure (yet) is solid.

The other big efficiency benefit of a sentence outline is that it confronts you immediately with assertions and claims that will signal you how weak or strong they are—mere topics don't do this—and you can attend to the former group, which need the most work, quickly.

- 1. You can easily start writing (expanding sections) in the middle of the outline

- ~~_____ a. because you know what the reader will have seen up to that point~~
- ~~_____ b. This is important~~
 - ~~_____ i. because beginnings should be written last and~~
 - ~~_____ ii. they are hard to write and thus slow you down.~~
- ~~_____ 2. You immediately see which assertions are worst supported, so you~~
- ~~_____ know where to invest research time (see IV.B.4).~~

IV. Sentence outlines are hard to write but the obstacles are illusory, or at least tractable

- A. They take more time and thought than topic outlines, but
 - 1. You have to do this thinking anyway.
 - 2. You wind up ahead in the long run: fully 00% of writers who try this technique report it reduced total writing time at least 00%. [*Use 00 and tk (for "to come") as searchable placeholders for facts, citations, and numbers to be filled in later, so you can keep writing and stay focused on your big ideas and overall argument.*]
- B. It's stressful to write down conclusions and assertions that you aren't able to support yet, but
 - 1. No-one ever said writing was easy
 - 2. You know more than you think, even if you can't prove it yet.
 - 3. Keep telling yourself "I can always insert the word *not* in this sentence if I find I guessed wrong"
 - 4. You can mark especially rubber-kneed entries and qualifications with special symbols or distinctive typography. (*Maybe not; what if I have to send the outline as an e-mail message...*)

V. Conclusions [*this is the other non-sentence heading*]

- A. Always make a sentence outline before you write more than a few pages of anything except a poem or a love letter.
- B. Insist that your subordinates do the same.