Harvard College Writing Center

Outlining

Trying to devise a structure for your essay can be one of the most difficult parts of the writing process. Making a detailed outline before you begin writing is a good way to make sure your ideas come across in a clear and logical order. A good outline will also save you time in the revision process, reducing the possibility that your ideas will need to be rearranged once you've written them.

**The First Steps**

Before you can begin outlining, you need to have a sense of what you will argue in the essay. From your analysis and close readings of primary and/or secondary sources you should have notes, ideas, and possible quotes to cite as evidence. Let's say you are writing about the 1999 Republican Primary and you want to prove that each candidate's financial resources were the most important element in the race. At this point, your notes probably lack much coherent order. Most likely, your ideas are still in the order in which they occurred to you; your notes and possible quotes probably still adhere to the chronology of the sources you've examined. Your goal is to rearrange your ideas, notes, and quotes—the raw material of your essay—into an order that best supports your argument, not the arguments you've read in other people's works. To do this, you have to group your notes into categories and then arrange these categories in a logical order.

**Generalizing**

The first step is to look over each individual piece of information that you've written and assign it to a general category. Ask yourself, "If I were to file this in a database, what would I file it under?" If, using the example of the Republican Primary, you wrote down an observation about John McCain's views on health care, you might list it under the general category of  "Health care policy." As you go through your notes, try to reuse categories whenever possible. Your goal is to reduce your notes to no more than a page of category listings.

Now examine your category headings. Do any seem repetitive? Do any go together? "McCain's expenditure on ads" and "Bush's expenditure on ads," while not exactly repetitive, could easily combine into a more general category like "Candidates' expenditures on ads." Also, keep an eye out for categories that no longer seem to relate to your argument. Individual pieces of information that at first seemed important can begin to appear irrelevant when grouped into a general category.

Now it's time to generalize again. Examine all your categories and look for common themes. Go through each category and ask yourself, "If I were to place this piece of information in a file cabinet, what would I label that cabinet?" Again, try to reuse labels as often as possible: "Health Care," "Foreign Policy," and "Immigration" can all be contained under "Policy Initiatives." Make these larger categories as general as possible so that there are no more than three or four for a 7-10 page paper.

**Ordering**

With your notes grouped into generalized categories, the process of ordering them should be easier. To begin, look at your most general categories. With your thesis in mind, try to find a way that the labels might be arranged in a sentence or two that supports your argument. Let's say your thesis is that financial resources played the most important role in the 1999 Republican Primary. Your four most general categories are "Policy Initiatives," "Financial Resources," "Voters' Concerns," and "Voters' Loyalty." You might come up with the following sentence: ÒAlthough McCain's policy initiatives were closest to the voters' concerns, Bush's financial resources won the voters' loyalty.Ó This sentence should reveal the order of your most general categories. You will begin with an examination of McCain's and Bush's views on important issues and compare them to the voters' top concerns. Then you'll look at both candidates' financial resources and show how Bush could win voters' loyalty through effective use of his resources, despite his less popular policy ideas.

With your most general categories in order, you now must order the smaller categories. To do so, arrange each smaller category into a sentence or two that will support the more general sentence you've just devised. Under the category of "Financial Resources," for instance, you might have the smaller categories of "Ad Expenditure," "Campaign Contributions" and "Fundraising." A sentence that supports your general argument might read: "Bush's early emphasis on fundraising led to greater campaign contributions, allowing him to have a greater ad expenditure than McCain."

The final step of the outlining process is to repeat this procedure on the smallest level, with the original notes that you took for your essay. To order what probably was an unwieldy and disorganized set of information at the beginning of this process, you need now only think of a sentence or two to support your general argument. Under the category "Fundraising," for example, you might have quotes about each candidate's estimation of its importance, statistics about the amount of time each candidate spent fundraising, and an idea about how the importance of fundraising never can be overestimated. Sentences to support your general argument might read: "No candidate has ever raised too much money [your idea]. While both McCain and Bush acknowledged the importance of fundraising [your quotes], the numbers clearly point to Bush as the superior fundraiser [your statistics]." The arrangement of your ideas, quotes, and statistics now should come naturally.

**Putting It All Together**

With these sentences, you have essentially constructed an outline for your essay. The most general ideas, which you organized in your first sentence, constitute the essay's sections. They follow the order in which you placed them in your sentence. The order of the smaller categories within each larger category (determined by your secondary sentences) indicates the order of the paragraphs within each section. Finally, your last set of sentences about your specific notes should show the order of the sentences within each paragraph. An outline for the essay about the 1999 Republican Primary (showing only the sections worked out here) would look something like this:

I. POLICY INITIATIVES

II.  VOTERS' CONCERNS

III.  FINANCIAL RESOURCES

            A.  Fundraising

                        a.  Original Idea

                        b.  McCain Quote/Bush Quote

                        c.  McCain Statistics/Bush Statistics

            B.  Campaign Contributions

            C.  Ad Expenditure

IV.  VOTERS' LOYALTY

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