CHAPTER 6

STEP 4: ORGANIZING AND OUTLINING YOUR THOUGHTS

This chapter covers:

- How to develop a purpose statement.
- The importance of a three-part structure.
- Different formats for organizing your outline.

After completing the first three steps, you are well on your way to an outstanding spoken or written product. Now it's time to talk about *organizing* and *outlining*, the final step in prewriting. A detailed outline helps you arrange your material logically, see relationships between ideas, and serves as a reference point to keep you on target as you write your draft. Think of your outline as the blueprint for your communication product, and realize that the time you spend preparing it will pay off when you start writing sentences and paragraphs.

ORGANIZING: FINALIZING YOUR PURPOSE STATEMENT AND "BOTTOM LINE"

> A *thesis statement* is a specialized form of purpose statement used in academic or persuasive writing.
>
> The thesis statement captures the author's point of view on a controversial topic, which he or she defends throughout the paper. A thesis statement is usually finalized after the research process.

Why are we talking about a purpose statement again? Didn't we determine our "bottom line" back in Step 1? Or did we? Sometimes information uncovered during the research process (Step 2) may point you in an unexpected direction. So do you tweak the data to match your original purpose? No! Now is the time to adjust the vector of your purpose statement to something you can reasonably support and live with.

You're less likely to go astray during the outlining process if you write down your purpose statement and refer to it often. Every main point and supporting idea in your outline should support that purpose statement—irrelevant facts or opinions should be eliminated. Discipline at this stage will save pain later.

ORGANIZING: GET YOUR BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT (MOST OF THE TIME)

> "In the future, authors will take a long time to get to the point. That way the book looks thicker."
>
> – Scott Adams in *The Dilbert Future: Thriving on Stupidity in the 21st Century*

In nearly every communication situation, you need to state your bottom line early in the message. In a direct or *deductive* approach, state your position, main point or purpose up front, then go into the details that support your main point. When you take a direct approach to communication, your audience is better prepared to digest the details of the message and logically make the connections in its own mind.

There is an exception to every rule, and you might want to be less direct when trying to persuade a hostile audience. In such a situation, if you state your bottom line up front, you risk turning them off before you build your argument—regardless of how well it is supported. In this case you might consider using an indirect or *inductive* approach: you may present your support and end with your bottom line. Sometimes this successfully "softens the blow" and gives your audience time to warm up to your views.

In the inductive approach, you still need an introduction, but it would be less direct. Here's an example of two purpose statements:

Direct: Women should be allowed in combat because….

Indirect: The issue of women in combat has been hotly debated, and both sides have valid points….

Use the inductive approach with caution; it's an advanced technique and difficult to execute without confusing your audience. In an academic setting, seek your instructor's advice before applying this method to your assignments.

THE OUTLINE: WHY DO I NEED ONE?

To some people, preparing an outline looks like a painful chore. Though an outline does take some effort, it's a time-saver, not a time-waster. An outline contains your main points and supporting ideas arranged in a logical order. It allows you to see and test the flow of your ideas on paper without having to write out complete sentences and paragraphs. If some ideas don't fit together or flow naturally, you can rearrange them without a lot of effort. Like the blueprint of a house, an outline makes the "construction process" more efficient and often results in a better quality product.

Does all writing require you to take the time to write a detailed outline with several layers of detail? No. If you plan to write a short letter, message or report, a list of main points may be all you need. For longer papers, Air Force publications, reports, staff studies, etc., you'll find a detailed outline is usually an indispensable aid.

OUTLINING: THREE-PART STRUCTURE

Chapter 7 will describe how most writing and speaking is organized in a three-part structure consisting of an introduction, a body and a conclusion. Most of the work in developing an outline involves organizing the body of your communication, but if you are building a formal or detailed outline on a lengthy written product, you should probably include the introduction and conclusion in the outline. A skilled communicator writing an informal outline on a short assignment may just outline the body and work out the introduction and conclusion during the drafting process.

OUTLINING FORMATS: HEADINGS AND STRUCTURE USED IN FORMAL OUTLINES

Though most outlines you produce will never be seen by anyone else, in some cases you might be asked to produce a formal outline for "public consumption." Here are some possible scenarios:

- Your boss wants to review what you plan to cover before you start drafting.
- Your document will have numbered headings and subheadings.
- You're organizing the efforts of multiple writers who must work together.

In these situations, it's helpful to have a consistent approach to numbering or lettering the different components of your outline. Be consistent once you pick your approach.

One option for an outline format is to use a numerical structure to identify different levels of the outline. In complicated documents like military publications, these levels may also be used as headings in the finished document to help readability. Another classic option is to use a mix of Roman numerals, Arabic numerals and uppercase and lowercase letters to identify the different levels. (For a refresher on Roman numerals, check out on page 336. A third option is to use the same headings as the paragraph labels in an official memo; see page 185 for details).

Note that some sections of your outline may be more detailed than others. In the below outline it is perfectly acceptable to divide section 1.2 into smaller elements and leave section 1.1 and 1.3 undivided.

NUMERICAL OUTLINE FORMAT

1. Section 1
   1.1 First subheading to Section 1
   1.2 Second subheading to Section 1
      1.2.1 First subheading to 1.2
      1.2.2 Second subheading to 1.2
   1.3 Third subheading to Section 1
2. Section 2
   2.1 First subheading to Section 2
      2.1.1 First subheading to 2.1
      2.1.2 Second subheading to 2.1
   2.2 Second subheading to Section 2
3. Section 3…

CLASSICAL OUTLINE FORMAT

I. Section I…
   A. First Subheading to Section I
      1. First subheading to I.A
         a.
         b.
      2. Second subheading to I.A
         a. …
         b. …
   B. Second Subheading to Section I
      1. First subheading to I.B
         a.
         b.
      2. Second subheading to "I.B"
         a.
II. Section II….

These two examples illustrate a cardinal rule of outlining: **any topic that is divided must have at least two parts.** Never create a Part 1 without a Part 2, or a Section A without a Section B.

These are only two of many possible formats for numbering different levels of a detailed outline. If your final product requires a particular format for headings or organization (for example, if you are writing an Air Force publication), you might save time later by building your outline with the format specified for the finished product. If not, any consistent approach will work fine.

Some people get tied up in knots over the mechanics of a formal outline. Remember that the primary purpose of an outline is to help you arrange your thoughts into main points and subordinate ideas, so relax and use a format that works for you.

✪ **Tip:** Each item in an outline should begin at the left margin. Second and following lines should be in block format or indented to align with the first word in the line above.

OUTLINING THE BODY: PICK A PATTERN

Your next step is to select a pattern that enables you and your readers to move systematically and logically through your ideas from a beginning to a conclusion. Some of the most common organizational patterns are listed below. Your purpose, the needs of your audience, and the nature of your material will influence your choice of pattern.

1. TOPICAL/CLASSIFICATION PATTERN

Use this format to present groups of ideas, objects or events by categories. This is a commonly used pattern to present general statements followed by numbered listings of subtopics to support, explain, or expand the statements.

Outline: Comparison of F-15 and F-16 Performance

A. General Description
   1. F-15
   2. F-16

B. Detailed Comparison
   1. Spec 1
   - F-15
   - F-16
   2. Spec 2
   - F-15
   - F-16
   3. Spec 3
   - F-15
   - F-16
   4. Spec 4
   - F-15
   - F-16

A topical pattern usually follows some logical order that reflects the nature of the material and the purpose of the communication. For example, if you are giving a briefing on helicopters, you might separate them into light, medium, and heavy lift capabilities and briefly describe the weight limits for each category. You could begin with the lightest capability and move to the heaviest or begin with the heaviest and move to the lightest.

✪ **Tip:** To help your readers absorb complex or unfamiliar material, consider organizing your material to move from the most familiar to the unfamiliar or from the simplest category to the most complex. When using this pattern, experiment to find the arrangement that will be most comfortable for your audience.

2. COMPARISON/CONTRAST PATTERN

Use this style when you need to discuss similarities and/or differences between topics, concepts, or ideas.

When you are describing similarities and differences, it often helps the reader to see a point-by-point comparison of the two items. For example, if you were writing a document that compares and contrasts certain characteristics of the F-15 and the F-16, you might go item by item, discussing similarities and differences between the two as you go.

3. CHRONOLOGICAL PATTERN

When you use this pattern, you discuss events, problems or processes in the sequence of time in which they take place or should take place (past to present or present to future). This commonly used pattern is used in writing histories, tracing the evolution of processes, recording problem conditions, and documenting situations that evolve over time.

This approach is also used in official biographies, which are written in chronological order because they serve as a history of the member's professional career.

This pattern is simple to use, but judgment is required when deciding what events to leave in and what events to leave out. For example, if you were preparing a short biography to introduce a distinguished guest speaker, you may decide to emphasize experiences that demonstrate his subject matter expertise and leave out other important but less relevant details. When unsure what to include, think back to your purpose and audience.

✪ **Tip:** You may want to consider a chronological approach to your topic when it is known to be controversial. Many writers and speakers will announce, "First let's take a look at the history of the problem." This starts the sender and audience out on neutral ground instead of just launching into the issue at hand. This is a type of inductive approach, and again, should be used with caution.

4. SEQUENTIAL PATTERN

The *sequential* or *step-by-step* approach is similar to the chronological pattern. Use this approach to describe a sequence of steps necessary to complete a technical procedure or process. Usually the timing of steps is not as important as the specific order in which they are performed. The outline on the first page of this chapter ("Seven Steps to Effective Communication") is an example of a sequential approach.

The sequential approach is often used in manuals and other instruction books. For example, a Security Forces NCO in charge of small arms training might use this pattern when rewriting the teaching manual on how to safely inspect, load, fire, disassemble, and clean weapons. Since safety is paramount, the process must be written in a precise, stepwise fashion to ensure that nothing is overlooked.

✪ **Tip:** When describing a procedure, explain the importance of *sequence* so your audience is mentally prepared to pay close attention to the order, not just the content, of the information.

5. SPATIAL/GEOGRAPHICAL PATTERN

When using this pattern, you'll start at some point in space and proceed in sequence to other points. The pattern is based on a directional strategy—north to south, east to west, clockwise or counterclockwise, bottom to top, above and below, etc. Let's say you are a weather officer briefing pilots about current and anticipated conditions in the geographic region where they will be flying a mission. You would most likely describe conditions in reference to the terrain and describe weather systems that will affect their mission on a map.

✪ **Tip: CAUTION!** Make sure to use appropriate transitions to indicate spatial relationships—to the left, farther to the left, still farthermost to the left; adjacent to, a short distance away, etc. These signal the flow of the communication; if missing, your audience can easily become confused or disoriented. (We'll talk more about transitions in the next chapter, on pages 70-73).

6. PROBLEM/SOLUTION PATTERN

You can use this pattern to identify and describe a problem and one or more possible solutions, or an issue and possible techniques for resolving the issue. Discuss all facets of the problem—its origin, its characteristics, and its impact. When describing the proposed solution, include enough support to convince your readers the solution is practical and cost effective. After presenting your solution, you may want to identify immediate actions required to implement the solution.

The problem/solution pattern may be used in several variations:

- One Solution: Discuss the problem and follow with the single, most logical solution.
- Multiple Solutions: Discuss the problem, several possible solutions, the effects of each and your recommendation.
- Multiple Solutions, Pro-Con: This popular format includes a discussion of the advantages ("Pros") and disadvantages ("Cons") of each solution.

Remember that a problem-solution pattern is not a format for a personal attack on an adversary; it's simply a systematic approach to use in persuading people either to accept your ideas or to modify their own ideas.

Problem Solution Example:
The Staff Study

The Staff Study format described on page 203 is a classic example of a problem/solution pattern. Within this format, you can present several possible solutions or just the one you recommend. A staff study with three options might have an outline that looks like this:

1. PROBLEM
2. FACTORS BEARING ON THE PROBLEM
   a. Facts
   b. Assumptions
   c. Evaluation criteria for solutions
3. DISCUSSION OF POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS
   a. Option 1- pros and cons
   b. Option 2- pros and cons
   c. Option 3- pros and cons
4. CONCLUSION

   "Option 3 is recommended…"
5. ACTION RECOMMENDED

   "Take the following steps…"

Though you can list your options in any order, skilled writers often "save the best for last" and put their recommended option last on the list to help readability.

7. REASONING/LOGIC PATTERN

In this pattern, you state an opinion and then make your case by providing support for your position. This is the classic "logical argument" described in Chapter 5. This approach works well when your goal is more than just discussion of problems and possible solutions. Use this pattern when your mission is to present research that will lead your audience down the path to your point of view!

✪ **Tip:** Remember your audience analysis? If members of your audience are hostile to your position, try to look at this issue through their eyes. Start out with the support they are most likely to accept, and then move into the less popular issues that support your main point.

8. CAUSE/EFFECT

You can use this pattern to show how one or more ideas, actions or conditions lead to other ideas, actions or conditions. Two variations of this pattern are possible: (1) begin with the effect, then identify the causes; or (2) begin with the causes, then identify the effects. The technique you use depends on the context of your discussion.

Causes, Effects and Faulty Logic

Be careful to avoid faulty logic traps when writing about cause and effect. You're guilty of a *false cause fallacy* when you assume one event causes a second event merely because it precedes the second event. You're guilty of a *single cause fallacy* when you assume only one factor caused an outcome, when in fact there are multiple causes. For more details on these and other fallacies, refer back to Chapter 5.

Sometimes an effect-to-cause approach is used when your purpose is to identify WHY something happened. When might you use this approach? Let's say you are the president of the Safety Investigation Board following a fatal aircraft mishap (*the effect*). Your report might begin by describing the mishap itself, and then explain the factors that led up to the mishap and conclude with your determination of one or more *causes* for the effect.

Sometimes a cause-to-effect pattern is used when your purpose is to explain how current actions or conditions (causes) may produce future consequences (effects). For example, someone might use this pattern to present how a series of causes—larger automobiles, reduced financial incentives for energy conservation and reduced research funding for alternative energy technologies—might result in an undesirable effect—a US shortage of fossil fuels.

SUMMARY

A well-planned outline can ease the pain of writing your first draft. Remember, building a house is much easier with a blueprint! This invaluable tool will help you remain focused on your purpose statement and help ensure your support is organized, relevant and tailored to your mission and audience. The outline will also help in the editing process. Take a break after working on your outline and start fresh before you begin your draft. Good luck!