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Outlines And Rough Drafts: Arguments And Evidence

Craig Williamson

Swarthmore College, cwillia1@swarthmore.edu

Raima Evan

Bryn Mawr College

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Outlines and Rough Drafts: Arguments and Evidence

I. Reading and Thinking

1. If you like a text very much and think you might want to write your paper on it, use your reading process as fully as you can. Keep a pen handy while you are reading and take notes on the inside of the front cover of the book or along the margins of the text. Underline passages as you read. Pay attention to certain themes or images that interest you. When you are finished reading the text, spend ten minutes jotting down your reactions to it while the impact is still fresh. Ask yourself what issues or ideas move you the most. What questions about the text strike you as most important? What problems does the text seem to pose? If you decide to write your paper on the text, it will be a lot easier to start if you have already taken these simple steps towards organizing your ideas.

II. Developing an Outline

1. If you are having trouble coming up with an idea for a paper, go over the text and jot down things that interest you. Things you might write down are quotations, recurring themes, images, and metaphors. Also jot down things that surprise you or mystify you, things that produce a strong emotion in you, things that you can't stop thinking about. Then go through your notes to see if there is one particular idea that you keep noticing and commenting on or a series of related ideas. This may well be the nucleus for your paper. Organizing your notes can help you develop your ideas and begin your outline.

2. Now you have a collection of notes. It's time to put together your road map through your paper: your outline. Write down your thesis--even if it is just a phrase that will need to be developed or honed. Outlines don't have to be fancy. Sketch out the different sections of your paper, which will help you, prove your point. Here is an example:

Thesis: The Grimms' *Ashputtle* stages violence against both Ashputtle and her stepsisters.

1. Both the mother and father emotionally abuse their children.
2. Both are physically violent: the father chops down the tree and dovecote, and the mother chops off portions of her daughters' feet.
3. This story is not really a romance. It's a story about how female children are at the mercy of their manipulative parents.

As you flesh out your outline, refine your thesis idea or topic into a real thesis that you will try to prove. Do not start writing your rough draft until you have a thesis and an outline clearly formulated. If you start writing too soon, your paper will wander and become repetitive.

III. Starting the Rough Draft

Your Thesis

Your introductory paragraph should have two parts: a thesis statement and what I call a “method statement.” Your thesis states your argument; your method indicates how you will prove your argument. Sometimes your method can be indicated in one sentence, but often you may need several sentences. In your first paper, please underline your thesis statement.

Transitions between paragraphs: The topic sentences

Make sure your transitions from paragraph to paragraph are clear. By transitions, I mean the first one or two sentences at the beginning of each paragraph. Transitions serve three crucial purposes: 1) They help the reader understand the relation between the previous paragraph and the new one. 2) They hearken back to the thesis, reminding the reader of your argument as a whole. 3) They introduce the next point in your argument. For this reason, they are often spoken of as “topic sentences,” as they state the concern of the new paragraph. A good transition allows your argument to move gracefully, to flow from point to point. Sometimes a transition can be achieved by a word or phrase: “Similarly...” “On the other hand,...” More often, however, a transition requires a sentence or two. Transitions are particularly crucial when your thesis is complex, as they remind your reader of the thrust of your argument.

Crafting your argument: What you put into your paragraphs

Be selective. For a short paper, focus on two or three points and analyze them in detail. Avoid quoting every passage or referring to every symbol that supports your argument.

Comment upon the quotations which you insert into your text. Demonstrate how they support your argument. Pick quotations that allow you to exercise your interpretive powers. If you have nothing much to say about a quotation--the imagery, the language, the assumptions which underlie it--then you should not introduce it into your paper. If you do not comment upon quotations, it will seem as if you are asking them to do your argumentative work for you. Remember that different readers will view the quotation in different ways; show the reader what you see in the quotation. This same rule applies to other uses of evidence from the text. For instance, if you want to discuss the significance of the hazel twig or the fish bones, make sure you have something compelling and detailed to say about them. Make sure your comments fit into the argument of the paragraph and also the overall argument.

Avoid summary. It is not necessary to describe events and mention details if they do not serve your thesis. Assume your reader is familiar with your text. You do not have to summarize everything that happens to Cinderella. Just move from one relevant example to the next as you prove your point. Excessive summary will bore your reader, obscure your thesis, and confuse you as you attempt to follow your outline.

Here are some basic rules for developing your argument and using evidence to support it:

Whether you are lawyer arguing a case before a jury, a scientist presenting research results at a conference, or a student writing a paper for a professor, you need EVIDENCE to sustain your argument. When analyzing a work of literature, you need TEXTUAL evidence. There are three basic strategies that can help you support your argument and convince your reader.

1) STATE YOUR ARGUMENT CLEARLY. This is what the thesis and method statements accomplish. See the handout on the thesis.

2) PRESENT YOUR EVIDENCE. Textual evidence can take a variety of forms. One can analyze character, imagery, the relationship between the narrator and the reader, the author's ideological assumptions--to name only a few approaches. Different literary approaches focus on different aspects of the text. But whichever key you use to open up the text, there are two basic strategies which will help you present your evidence:

a) Quote a passage from the text which supports your argument.

b) Refer to significant aspects of the text which support your argument.

3) ANALYZE YOUR EVIDENCE. Show the reader how the evidence supports your argument. If you use a quotation, analyze or interpret the quotation. Show the reader why you have chosen the quotation and how you read it. If you refer to a scene or action, explain why this is important, how you read it, and how it supports your argument.

Your conclusion

Think of your conclusion as an opportunity to reflect upon your thesis from a different perspective. Climb into a hot air balloon and look down upon the landscape of your paper. Consider some larger issue that your thesis touches on. Bring in a related point that puts your thesis in a new light. Show some further questions that your thesis raises. What you do not want to do is repeat your introduction. Even if your thesis is brilliant, the conclusion should not repeat what you have already said. Challenge your reader with your capacity for theorizing, for looking at the issues underlying your thesis.

The writing process

Your first draft is going to be a "rough" draft. Don't worry about making it perfect on the first attempt. Don't worry if everything in your argument is not tight. State your argument in the opening paragraph and make sure you know the points you want to cover in the body of the paper. Follow your outline, and if you get stuck, stop writing the draft and work further on your outline.

And one last piece of advice. Write about something you care about. The writing process will be easier; the final outcome will be better. You will enjoy writing more, and you will discover your voice as a writer. No one else can think your thoughts and put them down on the page. Revel in that.