

USING OUTLINES TO IMPROVE STUDENT WRITING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

Assisting students with written work continues to be a challenging task for today's teachers. Outlining represents a relevant instructional technique to help students develop self-regulated writing skills and promote higher order thinking. The author shares writing advice that can be used by teachers working in traditional face-to-face environments and those facilitating online learning courses.

The Art of Effective Writing

A growing trend in today's K-12 educational institutions is utilizing outlines to enhance the quality of student writing. Developing a writing plan is a vital step towards improving an individual's writing skills. The plan should reflect an emphasis on realistic strategies that foster constant improvement and help students create quality papers. Veteran writers recommend establishing a writing plan based on assignment due dates. A good writing plan will involve calculating the approximate amount of time needed to effectively complete the paper. It will take personal discipline to consistently work on the paper. A writing schedule will reduce stress by integrating enough time into the individual's daily routine to edit the paper and meet the deadline for the assignment. Writing plans help procrastinators who need to get started earlier on their work and perfectionists who continually want to make revisions by giving them a time line to finish each phase of their paper. A time line should include a degree of flexibility to insure that adequate time is allocated to devote more attention to different aspects (i.e. research) of the writing process (Sawers, 2000).

The planning process is essential step towards improving written work. It will involve selecting an appropriate topic, designing a thesis statement, conducting preliminary research to make sure the steps are taking a risk that could

cost them precious time. The preparation phase is an essential element in laying a solid foundation for the actual writing process which helps students to have a focused paper with appropriate information sources to support their ideas.

Students should strive for precision and impact in their papers. Students need to be reminded that contemporary readers are opposed to any form of media that appears to waste their time and people will often skip over journal or magazine articles that lack conciseness and visual appeal. Contemporary Americans are well known for surfing through an assortment of television or radio programs and web sites. Therefore, individuals must evaluate their use of language and decide whether it has the dynamic quality that captures the reader's attention or it reflects verbiage which repels potential readers. Brohaugh (2002) describes flabby writing as "any that slows the reader down ---anything that physically slows the sweep of the eyes across the words, that stands physically in the way of the reader's mind absorbing the meaning of the words as quickly as possible" (p. 2).

Students who tend to be verbose will write an excessive amount of words but the extra words produce confusion in the mind of the reader. For instance, redundancy is one type of wordiness and it can appear in several forms: use

three illustrations to support a single point, constantly repeating a major point and frequently using a term like "perspective." Redundancy is a misuse of words when writers cluster certain terms together for emphasis but clarity and the student's voice is lost in the process. Brohaugh (2002) relates that "pesky tautologies simply clutter things up saying 'mental telepathy' when 'telepathy' is enough or saying 'past achievement' when 'achievement' itself communicates that it happened in the past" (p. 17).

Student writers can enhance their writing skills by following a basic writing plan that helps them to effectively edit their work. Hostetler (2004, pp. 24-26) offers ten practical steps to polish their papers to which the author has appended with explanatory comments:

Ask who cares- focus on relevant knowledge that interest readers

Edit for weaknesses- enlist individuals who can provide constructive advice

Use computer tools- use spelling and grammar software

Proofread your work later- wait three days to edit to keep a fresh perspective

Delete unnecessary words- aim to create clear sentences

Highlight all verbs- select verbs to change from passive to active

Highlight adjectives and adverbs- delete redundant adjectives and verbs

Eliminate clichés- avoid using terms such as downsizing

Sprinkle in variety- vary sentence length, mix simple and complex sentences

Read aloud- identify sentences to changes such as location of verb

Utilizing Outlining Techniques

Writing an outlines provide opportunities for students to

refine their outlining skills and increase their understanding of critical thinking. Teachers can develop instructional plans that assist the student's cognitive information processing skills (Driscoll, 2005).

Hillocks' (1989) investigation identified the four effective instructional approaches to student writing:

Models - share good examples of writing and assisting students to identify parts of the model and stress is placed on producing a quality product.

Sentence - combining students learn to combine several sentences into one complex sentence and the emphasis is on the process of writing.

Scales - students learn how to evaluate the quality of compositions and revise the weaker works and the stress is upon revision.

Inquiry - students are given data and they are given directed to use the data in their writing which can range from descriptive to theoretical essays on the data. It encourages students to develop plans and organize their ideas.

Studies reveal that an excessive emphasis on grammar can actually promote weaker writing skills. A review of the literature on best writing practices affirms that importance of avoiding instructional approaches that create passive learning situations. Students should be challenged to use their metacognition skills to learn about the writing process (i.e. planning and revising) and devote time to comparing good and poorly written work to gain insights into the nature of quality narratives (Brynes, 2001).

Students who struggle with procrastination often find that it can have a negative impact on their ability to complete assignments and effectively meet course deadlines. O'Callaghan (2004) highlights research on students who procrastinate in their work by noting that students who struggle often have unwarranted negative appraisals of

their writing and avoid starting papers because it seems comforting to them. Also, the researcher found individuals had unrealistic writing expectations (i.e. it should be easy) and their emotional concerns overwhelmed their intentions to get started on tasks. Teachers can use outlines as a learning activity that addresses issues related to procrastination and anxiety. It is vital that the description of the outline assignments must be detailed and specific enough to provide adequate guidance.

The writing process involves several distinct phases: invention (i.e. brainstorming), organization, drafting, revision and sharing work with others. The author's assignment will stress the organizational element of writing. The assignment enables readers to use an expressive mode of writing which is common among novice writers. Creating outlines give students practical writing experiences which provides a basis for them to be prepared to move on to more sophisticated types of writing. "The writer is able to express thoughts in different ways, moving from the intimacy of his or her own thoughts to accommodate communication framed by different contexts and for different audiences" (Danielson, 2000, para 5).

A recent trend in K-12 instruction has been the use of mind mapping software programs (i.e. Inspiration Software, Inc., 2005). Teachers can use the mind maps to help provide visual images of complex ideas or concepts. Contemporary mind mapping software enables students to create a diversity of outlines that help them to experiment and organize their ideas into meaningful sentences. The author recommends Mind Manager (2005) for teachers because it is superior to Inspiration and it can address a wider range of audiences and offers more sophisticated design options. Mind Manager can translate textual material into visually appealing and innovative charts (see Figure 1).

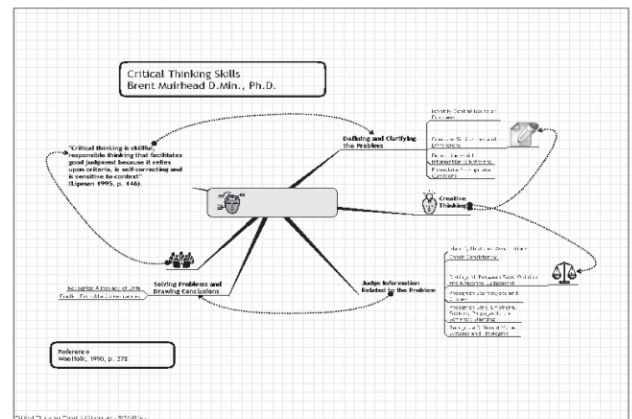


Figure 1 Critical Thinking Skills

Outlines should reflect logical thinking and have an organizational structure that enables the reader to quickly identify the purpose of the assignment. Teachers should share examples of excellent outlines that demonstrate logic, clear classification system and shows relationship between ideas. A useful classification system: criteria, self-correcting and context. Students must be reminded that the outline is a first step in the writing process that helps them to translate their ideas into an organized format. The outline provides a form of self-regulation to learn how to check on the quality of their work and examine whether it properly aligns with the purpose of the assignment. Additionally, it encourages students to see outlining as a positive part of the writing process. Outlining promotes a deeper understanding of the material because it requires taking the time to create and arrange information into sentences which reflect distinct aspects of critical thinking.

The teacher can utilize outlines as a tool to promote constructive student self-talk or self-speech to monitor and reflect on their work. Outlines help students focus their thinking toward completing a specific set of writing steps and avoid making impulsive responses. Students appreciate having a set of specific expectations that helps reduce feelings of anxiety and frustration about written assignments (Harris & Graham, 1996).

Outlines should affirm the writer's thesis or purpose statement. Students need to be careful that their outlines reflect an organizational design that fits their topic. The organizational structure of the paper might involve one or more of the following formats:

- Narrative: telling a story
- Descriptive: relating what you see, hear, taste, feel, and smell
- Process: describing a sequence of steps necessary to a process
- Definition: illustrating the meaning of certain words or ideas
- Division and Classification: grouping ideas, objects, or events into categories
- Compare and Contrast: finding similarities and/or differences between topics
- Analogy: make a comparison between two topics that initially seem unrelated
- Cause and Effect: explaining why something happened, or the influence of one event upon another (Dartmouth writing program, Modes of arrangement, para 2 2004).

Writing is known as a complex activity that involves an assortment of cognitive tasks. Bruner et al (2004) states it includes "...working and long-term memory, procedural and declarative knowledge, motivation, self-regulation, and beliefs and attitudes" (p. 291). A theoretically sound cognitive model of writing is able to effectively recognize variances in writing such as different types (i.e. poetry, letter or essay), variety of tasks which have different intent, narrative length and creative expectations, writer's goals, experience and age and degree of complexity. Outlining requires students to use essential cognitive processing elements "...include understanding main ideas, generating inferences that link these ideas together, and

relating them to related information in the memory" (Bruner et al, 2004, p.31).

Contemporary writing theories reflect different philosophical and theoretical approaches. Daiute (2000) relates "most notably that the cognitive strategy approach characterizes writing as primarily problem solving, while process theory characterizes writing as primarily creative discovery. These theories have led to different applications of computers as writing tools" (p.255). Teachers strive to have work that stimulates intellectual growth and assignments must be aligned to the cognitive maturity of their students. Outline assignments can emphasize a variety of instructional objectives but there will be elements of critical thinking due to the need for problem solving and creativity to develop sentences.

Flowers and Hayes' (1984) writing model emphasizes three major phases: task environment, long-term memory and working memory. The task environment involves a description of the writing assignment which would include a specific topic and target audience. The outline assignment will stress a critical thinking topic and the author is the audience. Motivational cues are often e is grades and the outline represents graded work. Teachers must strive to make clear assignments because confusing directions can cause students to miss the original purpose of the task and not produce their best work. The external storage is second aspect of the task environment which is the text produced and the use of resources such as student notes from articles, drafts of paper, teacher lecture notes, handouts and previous student papers. External storage plays a key role in reducing the writer's memory load which enables individuals to work on new knowledge to write and revise new material. The writer's long-term memory according Flowers and Hayes (1984) impacts the entire writing process. "Cognitive processes

interact continually in working memory and long-term memory as writers think through their goals, search for ideas and vocabulary, and evaluate and review text that they have written" (p. 294). Students can use brainstorming techniques to stimulate their long-term memory to recall ideas and concepts as they seek to develop their outlines (Furneaux, 1998).

Creating outlines offers distinct opportunities for students to develop self-regulation cognitive strategies that often are called self-talk. Harris and Graham (1996) note six types of useful self-instructions during the writing process:

- problem definition
- focusing of attention and planning
- strategy
- self-evaluating and error correcting
- coping and self-control
- self-reinforcement (p. 139).

It is important for teachers to balance their teaching activities to provide students with subject content knowledge, instructional guidance to assist in learning writing skills. The working memory is where the majority of the writing tasks take place and three major processes are associated with it: planning, translating and reviewing. Planning requires individuals to develop goals and generating ideas which might arise from their long-term memory. Generating content and relevant ideas flows throughout the writing process as individuals organize their material into coherent structures. Working memory does involve the writer's translation of ideas by accessing their semantic memories and locating the vocabulary to express their thoughts. Researchers have noticed a trait of good writers is their automatic translating skills enable them to reduce stress of items on their working memory (McCuthen, 1996). The reviewing process in the working memory pertains to evaluating and revising the writing. Good writers are better at understanding of how to

integrate their subject content and discourse knowledge. Outline exercises offer students the opportunity to create and revise their ideas that will reflect greater coherency as they become more skilled in this aspect of the writing process. Also, good writers are able to identify flaws in their work such as the choice of words or excessively repeating a term or phrase. Graham and Harris (1993) noticed that less sophisticated writers had problems seeing the value in editing their first draft. Often, those who struggle with writing will neglect devoting adequate attention to revising papers. This affirms the need for teachers to help students cultivate self-regulation skills and use outlines as a valuable tool for communicating ideas which can be transformed into a formal paper.

Bruning et al (2004) observes stresses on the dynamic nature of the writing process. Writers will float back and forth between steps and revise their work. It is not linear process because individuals will add or delete content or revise sentences. Therefore, outlines should be viewed as flexible documents that offer direction to work but they can be revised and changed.

The author recognizes the value of using computers and Word processing tools when doing written assignments. Word processors offer distinct advantages by providing accessible spell and grammar checkers to edit sentences. Students must be given guidance in using Word processors because they are not a substitute for the editing textual material and students need to be instructed in how to properly document ideas taken from Internet sources.

A new technological trend is evolving with the development of online writing labs at distance education universities. Students at the University of Phoenix (UOP) can electronically submit their papers to The Center for Writing Excellence. The Tutor Review service provides feedback on the first four or five pages of the student's paper in the

following areas: grammar, word usage and organizational issues. Often, students will receive their Tutor Review feedback within 48 hours but periods of higher paper submissions will result in feedback coming in 4 or 5 days. The Tutor Review program has become quite popular with students who appreciate the relevant and specific remarks. The WritePointsm Automated Review system offers detailed feedback within minutes to students. The K-12 schools would benefit from having access to similar Internet based writing labs.

Conclusion

The Flower and Hayes (1984) model of writing has been criticized for being too vague by failing to offer specific insights into the actual mechanics of text production. Yet, the model has been very influential among writing experts (Furneaux, 1998). Creating outlines encourages students to devote more attention to organizing their ideas and make thoughtful decisions about their choices of words to communicate their ideas. Outlines can play a vital role as part of a comprehensive set of instructional strategies that can improve the quality of student writing and foster critical thinking skills.

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