

Strategies for Finding Your Own Writing Problems

Outlining and Reverse Outlining: Most writers know that outlining before writing can be helpful, especially for writers who have problems with organization. A less commonly known but often more useful strategy is to outline *after* writing. Don't get hung up on formal outlining format. Just go through and outline what's currently in your paper, so that you can look back at your outline to see if there's a logical flow to the information. Or do this without looking back at your paper, but *after* you've finished writing it. At that point you have a pretty good idea of what you want to say, and it may be the ideal point to think about the structure/organization of your paper. These strategies help with organization and reorganization.

Annotating: A variation on the reverse outlining idea is annotation. In the margins of your draft, write one or two word summaries of what you're talking about. You should have at least one term per paragraph, but you might find that some paragraphs require two or three different terms. Look back at those annotations (the terms you've written in the margin) to see where you could reorganize so that all of your discussion of a single topic is grouped together, or where you have several different topics all in one paragraph. Like reverse outlining, annotation is helpful for organizing your paper, but it's also useful for seeing where you're repeating yourself and where you have ideas that aren't very thoroughly discussed/developed.

Reading Backwards: We can't literally read backwards, but we can read sentence by sentence, beginning from the end. When you've worked on your draft for so long that you're sick to death of it, read it backwards to find editing errors.

Double Entry Writing: Write your paper and then write about your paper, sort of parallel to your original draft. Write about what you meant, what you were trying to say, what you hoped the reader would get from a particular paragraph. This helps you rethink what you've written, find places where your draft doesn't really convey what you had in mind, etc.

Double Entry Writing, Version II: Write down quotes you might like to use or important ideas from sources on one half of your page. Next to each item, write down your own ideas about that idea or quote, how your topic connects to it, or how your experiences relate to it. When you're done, you'll have the beginnings of a lot of ideas that can be used in your paper, and they will be roughly organized by topic. This process also can be used in reverse if you have a lot of your own ideas about the topic but need to connect to sources. That is, put your own ideas on one side, and then find ideas and quotes from the sources that seem to relate to the ideas you want to talk about.

Naming Main Points: Ask yourself, "When someone finishes reading this paper, what should that person be left with?" Your answer should be in this form: "I want the reader to *understand that....*" or "I want the reader to *see why....*" (However, it's *not* such a good idea to put your answer in the form, "I want the reader to *understand about....*" – that format leads you to a data dump paper, rather than to actually making a point.) The answer to your question will be the basis for your thesis or central idea. You should have clearly made that point somewhere in your paper. Furthermore, everything you've included in the paper should help the reader understand what you mean by your thesis or why you claim that thesis. This strategy can help you identify your thesis, provide support for your thesis, and cut extraneous ideas from your paper.

Clustering or Webbing with Brainstorming: Most of us are familiar with the idea of brainstorming, and we know that it's a good thing to write down all those ideas so we don't forget them. We usually write them down as lists. But if you're brainstorming to think of what you might want to include in a paper, try brainstorming as a cluster. To do this, just put your main idea in the center of the page and start writing other ideas around it. Draw lines to make connections between ideas that are closely related. By the time you're done, you not only will have generated lots of ideas related to your main idea, but you'll also have a visual aid that helps you see which ideas are really closely related to many others, which are sort of peripheral, etc. This should help you with drafting, expanding, or organizing.

Reading Like an Outsider: Ask yourself the question, "If I gave this to my roommate or a friend who's not in the class, could he or she make sense of it?" As a class "insider," you might be leaving out material that is essential to understanding your point – it seems obvious to you, and you think it'll be obvious to your teacher as well. But most teachers want to see you write in a way that would make sense to an attentive reader who is not a class insider. So imagine that outside reader, or have that person read your paper out loud to you. Or read your paper out loud to the other person. If you find yourself stopping to explain, or feeling like you might need to add a little explanation for the outsider, you also might want to add that information to the version you'll actually use in class.

Writing a Good Introduction or Conclusion: Introductions and conclusions are difficult for many writers. But here are some basic ideas for these challenging pieces of your paper.

1. Use a frame. In other words, find an idea, an image, a story, that you can use to begin your essay. Return to that same word, idea, image, or story as part of your conclusion. This makes your paper feel like it has a beginning and an end that tie the whole thing together.
2. Write a "so what?" conclusion. Read over what you've written. Ask yourself, "So what? What does all this add up to? Why does this matter?" Answer those questions and you have a conclusion.
3. Don't let yourself get too worried about a "good" intro right away. If a poor intro allows you to get started on the body of your paper, you'll probably find that you write yourself into a clearer understanding of your point (and, therefore, a better intro) by the time you're done drafting. Write the intro then.
4. Include something in your intro that tells the reader where you're going in your paper. That doesn't have to be in the form of a thesis, but it can be. It doesn't have to be formal (i.e., "In this paper I will...") but that works in some traditional "academic" forms of writing. However you write it, the purpose is to somehow cue the reader about your basic path or argument. For an essay, the cues should be reasonably subtle. For a research paper, more blatant cues can be OK.
5. Remember that your intro and conclusion need to be proportional. For a five page paper, a one page intro is almost certainly too long. So keep it short and get right into the meat of your ideas.
6. An introduction can "zero in" on your point. That is, you can start with the big view and focus down to your main idea. But don't start so big that you're saying things that everyone already knows (e.g., "Violence is a major problem in the world today."). If you use this strategy successfully, you can use the reverse of your zeroing in for your conclusion (i.e., branching back out).
7. Consider beginning with a fact, a quote, or an anecdote. It shouldn't be too broad, and dictionary definitions are rarely effective. Avoid the obvious; but if you can find something fresh that really sets the stage for where you're trying to go in the paper, use it.