

The UNB Writing Centre

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Essay Outlines

Before they begin their work, most writers have an idea of the final shape of their thoughts. Often the form is forced upon them: They are writing in response to an assignment. Sometimes structure develops unwillingly. If this is the case, you might wish to draw an outline before you proceed to writing a rough draft. Several types of outlines are popular.

1. Topic Outline

Topic outlines are easy to make, but they offer few other advantages. A topic outline is an organized list of the subjects the essay will deal with. Here is a simple example:

Working Title: Modern Drama and the Tradition of Farce

Working Thesis: Farce, mere slapstick in the sixteenth century, developed a serious dramatic theory, absurdism, and finally became a permanent part of popular comedy.

1. Ancient Models
 - a) Greece
 - b) Rome
2. French Developments
 - a) Extemporaneous Additions
 - b) Establishment of Form
3. English Farce
 - a) Brief Comedies
 - b) Low Humour
 - c) Farce-Comedy
4. Modern and Contemporary Drama
 - a) Jarry
 - b) Pirandello
 - c) Ionesco
 - d) Beckett
 - e) Pinter
 - f) Stoppard
5. Beyond the Legitimate Theatre: Farce and Popular Culture
 - a) The Fringe
 - b) Monty Python
 - c) *Saturday Night Live*
 - d) *SCTV*
 - e) *Kids in the Hall*

2. Sentence Outline

Sentence outlines are formatted exactly as topic outlines are, but whole sentences replace the brief headings. The sentences state the crucial point of each stage of the paper. Consequently, a sentence outline provides a real test of your argument. This is a sentence outline developed from the material previously presented as a topic outline:

Working Title: Modern Drama and the Tradition of Farce

Working Thesis: Farce, mere slapstick in the sixteenth-century, became the idiom of existential expression in the twentieth. Because farce combines theatrical and intellectual elements, it has become a permanent part of all serious comedy.

1. The comedies of antiquity established the models for later playwrights.
 - a) The germs of both satire (Old Comedy) and farce (New Comedy) exist in Greek comedies.
 - b) Roman dramatists produced well-made farces, developing the traditions of Greek New Comedy.
2. During the mid to late Renaissance, French dramatists developed an elaborate comic literature, while farces, lacking a literary tradition, grew spontaneously out of theatrical tradition.
 - a) Farces began as extemporaneous additions made by comic actors to the action of a more serious play.
 - b) Dramatists, attracted by the energy and theatrical success of these improvisations, began to write them into their plays.
3. The English Farce, growing from brief interludes, came to dominate whole plays.
 - a) Farces began as very brief comedies marked by knockabout humour.
 - b) The Farce became a full play, still characterized, however, by low humour.
 - c) The growth of the Farce was completed when the Farce-Comedy, a hybrid mixture of plot and comic action, appeared in the eighteenth century.
4. Modern dramatists, intent on demonstrating the rootlessness of human experience, made elements of the Farce the idiom of modernity.
 - a) Absurdists and Pre-Absurdists such as Pirandello, Jarry, and Ionesco capitalized upon the manic, confusing qualities of farce to express human alienation.
 - b) Beckett bridged the English and French theatrical cultures with *Waiting for Godot*, which brought farce to the attention of the North American and British intellectuals.
 - c) Pinter, Stoppard, and Ayckbourn drew upon the work of the Absurdists and upon the tradition of farce, creating a popular theatrical idiom for serious, mainstream comedy.
5. The new farce quickly outgrew the legitimate theatre and found a new home in mass entertainment.
 - a) The idiom of farce passed from the new playwrights to the new television comedians: The Fringe, Monty Python, and their many imitators.
 - b) Troupes in the United States and in Canada (e.g. *Saturday Night Live*, *SCTV*, *Kids in the Hall*), working directly with the new tradition of farce, brought the technique to a growing audience.

Once you have reached the stage of a sentence outline, you will have an excellent idea of how valid your argument is, as well as a sense of its shape. Your outline is more than an organizational device at this point: It is a test of your ideas. If you cannot form a sentence

outline, you probably have little chance of arguing your points. In the narrow limits of a sentence outline, weak ideas and unsupported assumptions are obtrusive. Notice, by the way, that in the sentence outline the last two sections are quite unlike their topic outline counterparts. They group their components and establish connections between them. This is not simply an effect created arbitrarily in this example; it is absolutely typical of the difference between sentence outlines and topic outlines.

3. Paragraph Outline

A variation on the sentence outline is the paragraph outline, in which you attempt to compose the actual sentences with which your successive paragraphs will begin. The advantage is clear: This technique forces you to begin your paragraphs with strong topic sentences rather than vague introductions and transitions. Against this real gain is poised the complexity of the task. You may well find that this exercise takes so much effort that it interferes with the actual writing of the paper. A sentence outline is a very useful middle form, neither so easy as to be pointless nor so demanding as to steal time from the paper itself.