

## The Value of Outlining Your Ideas

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Many students tell me that they either: (A) do not understand how to outline their thoughts for papers or for oral presentations or (B) that they have had insufficient or unsuccessful experiences in outlining their thoughts. Since I believe these claims and since I know from personal experience how valuable an organizing tool careful and detailed outlining can be to the production of quality writing, speaking, and thinking, I thought it might be useful to provide a genuine outlining case study for an essay I am preparing for a communication conference paper.

I outline my ideas in stages, trying to expand, refine, and sequence my ideas in parallel layers of complexity as work stages develop. I have found that, for me, over development of one or a few ideas from among a larger cluster of ideas sidetracks me and/or contributes to a loss of conscious balancing (parallelism) of equally subordinate ideas. At each stage in my outlining, I attempt to expand/refine my ideas at relatively equal levels. The product of this methodical organizing effort points out main or subordinate ideas that may not be equally as important as other thoughts in the total organizing plan. Such insight often provide clues that: (1) some of my ideas are under-developed; of measurably less importance and may need to be omitted or folded in as a subordinate part of another idea; or (2) that some other ideas may be either over-developed or may need to be subdivided into multiple points. Haphazardly developing major and minor points in an outline inhibits these insights and can result in wasted time and frustrating redundancies, dead ends, and unequally balanced subpoints supporting a major thought.

After the first few "rough drafts", I make it a point to gradually: (1) start forming subpoints in parallel format; this serves as an additional check on whether or not my subpoints are truly and clearly discrete, balanced, and relevant; (2) writing ideas in more complete sentence format; I find this aids me in future written sentence or oral idea construction; and (3) introduce possible synonyms for repetitive phrases (see outline draft 4, III, A through D, items 1-4 [ie: "possible, likely, typical, and anticipated"] giving these parallel entries at the 3rd outlining level some stylistic variety suggesting (but not requiring) a similar style in eventual writing or speaking. Language variety comes more easily to me and takes less time and effort when it results from planned and gradual effort rather than being the product of last minute end-product editing.

I have discovered that when I take the time and expend the energy to develop a detailed, expanded outline, the rewriting and editing I must do for papers and speeches (and revisions are true in all my important work) is lessened. I find outlining to be labor intensive; but compared to the time spent in the past when

I neglected or refused to outline my ideas, I save a great deal of time in the end and I can see better results coming from the thorough outline approach than from the expressive papers and speeches I was rendering from the no outline or the sketchy outline methods I formerly employed -- yes, I, too, was once a disbeliever in the method I now live by. A kind, patient, and wise teacher in my past gently prodded me into trying outlines to improve my writing; and I believe it worked.

Do not even hope you will get positive, miraculous results from your first few efforts at this method of approaching organizing your ideas. Outlining is a skill; and as you know from learning other skills (social skills, motor skills, and cognitive skills), they do not spontaneously develop. You must practice and repeat doing new behaviors before they become easy.

Find someone who already knows how to outline to act as: a reader of your beginning efforts, a sympathizer for your eventual frustrations, a cheerleader for your noble intentions, and an encourager for even better future work. Even teachers and professional writers have others read their work before it is complete; to check for thoroughness, clarity, style, and mechanics.

Try outlining; with some effort, you will likely discover the process makes writing easier, quicker, and more successful. Be patient and realistic with yourself while learning outlining skills. Learning takes time, but it is worth the effort.

**1st Rough Draft  
September 12**

- I. Introduction.
- II. Review relevant literature.
- III. Discuss contexts in which persons holding divergent credibility views would interact.
- IV. Conclusion.

Note: The 2nd draft was rendered after I checked out available library resources at the library. This library check allowed me to foresee possible avenues of detailed discussion.

**East-West Credibility Outline  
2nd Rough Draft  
September 13**

- I. Introduction.
  - A. Introduce essay thesis.
  - B. Give study rationale.
- II. Review relevant literature.
  - A. Extensive literature focusing on Western credibility.
  - B. Minimal literature focusing on Eastern credibility.
- III. Discuss contexts in which persons holding these divergent credibility views would interact.
  - A. Likely difficulties.
  - B. Probable consequences.
  - C. Possible corrective measures.
- IV. Conclusion.

**East-West Credibility Outline**

**3rd Draft  
September 14**

- I. Introduction.
  - A. Introduce essay thesis.
  - B. Give study rationale.
  
- II. Review relevant literature.
  - A. Extensive literature focusing on Western credibility.
    - 1. Begin with source credibility literature.
    - 2. Follow up with message credibility literature.
  - B. Minimal literature focusing on Eastern credibility.
    - 1. Begin with source credibility literature.
    - 2. Follow up with message credibility literature.
  
- III. Discuss contexts in which persons holding these divergent credibility views would interact.
  - A. Diplomatic contexts.
    - 1. Anticipated difficulties arising from incongruent views of credibility.
    - 2. Likely speaker/listener consequences arising from such difficulties.
    - 3. Typical content centered difficulties arising from such difficulties.
    - 4. Potential ways creative/sensitive communicants can negotiate their credibility based differences.
  - B. Business contexts.
    - 1. Anticipated difficulties arising from incongruent views of credibility.
    - 2. Likely speaker/listener consequences arising from such difficulties.
    - 3. Typical content centered difficulties arising from such difficulties.
    - 4. Potential ways creative/sensitive communicants can negotiate their credibility based differences.
  - C. Social contexts.

1. Anticipated difficulties arising from incongruent views of credibility.
  2. Likely speaker/listener consequences arising from such difficulties.
  3. Typical content centered difficulties arising from such difficulties.
  4. Potential ways creative/sensitive communicants can negotiate their credibility based differences.
- D. Educational/professional contexts.
1. Anticipated difficulties arising from incongruent views of credibility.
  2. Likely speaker/listener consequences arising from such difficulties.
  3. Typical content centered difficulties arising from such difficulties.
  4. Potential ways creative/sensitive communicants can negotiate their credibility based differences.

IV. Implications/conclusion

## September 16

- I. Introduction.
  - A. Introduce essay thesis: "Western and Eastern rhetors must understand the other's sense of what constitutes source and message credibility in order to interact with each other on an equitable, coherent, civil, and goal oriented manner."
  - B. Give study rationale.
    1. Cite McLuhan's "global village" concept.
    2. Cite: economic, geo-political, tourist centered, and educational reasons why communicants must understand each other.
- II. Review relevant literature.
  - A. Extensive literature exists focusing on Western credibility.
    1. Begin with source credibility literature.
      - a. Show breadth of scholarly interest in source credibility issues.
      - b. Show depth of scholarly interest in source credibility issues.
    2. Follow up with message credibility literature.
      - a. Show breadth of scholarly interest in message credibility issues.
      - b. Show depth of scholarly interest in message credibility issues.
  - B. Minimal literature exists focusing on Eastern credibility.
    1. Begin with source credibility literature.
    2. Follow up with message credibility literature.
- III. Discuss contexts in which persons holding these divergent credibility views would interact.
  - A. Diplomatic contexts.
    1. Anticipated difficulties arising from incongruent views of credibility.

2. Likely speaker/listener consequences arising from such difficulties.
3. Likely content centered difficulties arising from such difficulties.
4. Potential ways creative/sensitive communicants can negotiate their credibility based differences.

B. Business contexts.

1. Anticipated difficulties arising from incongruent views of credibility.
2. Likely speaker/listener consequences arising from such difficulties.
3. Likely content centered difficulties arising from such difficulties.
4. Potential ways creative/sensitive communicants can negotiate their credibility based differences.

C. Social contexts.

1. Anticipated difficulties arising from incongruent views of credibility.
2. Likely speaker/listener consequences arising from such difficulties.
3. Likely content centered difficulties arising from such difficulties.
4. Potential ways creative/sensitive communicants can negotiate their credibility based differences.

D. Educational/professional contexts.

1. Anticipated difficulties arising from incongruent views of credibility.
2. Likely speaker/listener consequences arising from such difficulties.
3. Likely content centered difficulties arising from such difficulties.
4. Potential ways creative/sensitive communicants can negotiate their credibility based differences.

IV. Implications/conclusion.

- A. How will various communicative acts improve as a result

of congruent credibility strategies and expectations?

- B. What are likely by-products of improved communication deriving from improved credibility understanding?
- C. What does the communicative future portend?