
ACTIVITY FOUR: REVERSE OUTLINING

Academic writing teachers try to help learners understand and imitate the various rhetorical styles used in academic texts. Understanding academic writing involves careful and repeated reading, analysis, and evaluation of many texts. It then requires further analysis, synthesis, and creation to imitate the writing style. All of this work involves using critical thinking and language skills. One way to engage learners in this process and support the acquisition of advanced writing skills is to use students' existing critical thinking skills in an activity that analyzes the components of academic writing.

This Teacher's Corner offers a strategy to introduce learners to academic writing through the familiar task of outlining. Writers use outlining as a way to plan and organize their ideas at the beginning of the writing process. In this activity, learners use the outline in reverse as a way to break down and analyze the structure of an academic text. This process is called a reverse outline and is explained in detail here. Keep in mind that a reverse outline can be adapted to fit the needs of intermediate writers as well, as long as the reading is selected to meet learners' language level.

LEVEL

Advanced (university level)

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Reading
Writing

GOALS

During this activity, students will be able to complete the following tasks:

- Read an academic text to identify the organization and structure of ideas.
- Organize the information presented in an academic text into an outline template in order to recognize the structure and organization of an academic text.

MATERIALS

- Reading: [“Helping Students Develop Coherence in Writing”](#) by Icy Lee
- Outline Template in Appendix A
- Paper and pencils or pens

PREPARATION

- Print enough copies of the reading for each student.
- Print enough copies of the outline template for each student.

PROCEDURE

1. Start class with a warm-up discussion to elicit ideas about the structure of academic writing. Use these questions as a guide:
 - a. What are the important parts of an academic essay?
 - b. What do we call the first paragraph(s)? The main paragraphs? The final paragraph(s)?
 - c. What have you been told to include in the first paragraph(s) of an essay?
 - d. What is included in the main paragraphs?
 - e. What is included in the final paragraph(s)?
2. Hand out the outline template (Appendix A) to students. (The outline template can be adapted and adjusted to meet the needs of essay writing in your specific class. Feel free to add components to this outline or delete components that are unnecessary.) Ask learners to review the template for similarities between what they said in the discussion and what the template lists as components of academic writing.
 - a. Is there anything on the outline template that was not mentioned in the discussion? If so, what are the differences? Is there anything that students think the outline template needs to include that is not listed?

3. Explain that this outline is a model of the structure, but that every article differs slightly as to how each of the core parts is structured. For example, one essay might have 10 body paragraphs but another essay might only have 4.
4. Tell students they are now going to use the outline to read an academic article. They will complete an outline, using the template as a model, based on the information from the article they read.
5. Give everyone a copy of the article. Explain that before trying to complete the outline, they should read the article once and make notes. Reading once will help them process the article, ask questions, and get an overview of the structure of the article.
6. Have learners read, make notes, and complete their outlines. While they are working, circulate to answer any questions they have.
7. After learners have completed the outlines, bring the class back together as a group.
8. Place students in pairs by dividing the class in half and counting off each group (for example: 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.). The two students who are assigned 1 will work together, the students assigned 2 will work together, etc.
9. Once learners are in their pairs, ask them to read over their partners' outlines, paying attention to similarities and differences.
10. While they are reading, write these directions on the board.
 - a. Compare the two outlines and identify any areas where the information is different or where information is on one outline but not the other.
 - b. Work together to complete a new outline that combines the information from both outlines.
 - c. Work together to decide how to include information that is different on personal outlines.
11. Then give each pair a new outline template. Explain that students will work together to create a new outline, using the directions on the board.
12. When pairs have finished, bring the class back together to discuss what they learned from the outline activity.

- a. What information on the outline did they expect to see? What information was unexpected in the article's structure? What else did they learn about how academic writing is structured?

VARIATIONS

One simple variation is to have students read the text at home and take notes before working on the outline in class. This variation allows students to read at their own pace so that when students come to class, they are all familiar with the text.

Another alternative to this assignment is to have students work in pairs from the beginning of the process. After everyone in the class reads the article, put students in pairs and have them work together to complete the outlines. This variation ensures that learners will vocalize, discuss, and negotiate what is included on the outline and what is not.

EXTENSIONS

A possible extension to this activity is to revisit the reverse outline when students are writing their own essays. During the revision process students could complete a reverse outline of their own work or complete reverse outlines of their classmates' work. For example, if students have written a first draft of an essay, before they revise it or write a second draft, they could do a reverse outline of their first draft. By doing so, they could recognize areas in their writing to improve. Then, students could use their reverse outline for help in preparing and writing a second draft.

APPENDIX A

Outline Template

- I. Introduction
 - a. Attention grabbing device
 - b. Background/Contextual information
 - c. Thesis statement
- II. Main Paragraphs (repeat for each paragraph)
 - a. Topic statements/ideas
 - b. Supporting evidence (data, anecdotes, stories, definitions, etc.): paraphrase, summary, quotes
 - c. Connections to thesis
- III. Conclusion
 - a. Final thoughts
 - b. Implications and areas for future analysis
 - a. Suggestions for next steps

