Writing a "Prose Outline"
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Every time we write, either we practice healthy writing skills, or we don't. When we do, we create and strengthen good writing habits. When we don't, we become sloppy writers. Our writing inevitably builds up or tears down. I have found that requiring students to write in "prose outline" form is a good step in reforming sloppy writing habits. Here's what I mean by a prose outline:

1. Each point you make becomes a block of text in the outline rather than a sentence in a paragraph.
2. Your points are not sentence fragments, but *complete* and *well written sentences*.
3. You relate these points to each other by sequencing and indenting the blocks. One point supported by three other points becomes one block of text with three indented blocks following it. You still use verbal cues such as "therefore" and "however" to clarify the flow of your logic; explicitly arranging these blocks merely exposes and reinforces the structure of your reasoning.
4. How or whether you number your points is up to you, as long as your system works. However, unnecessary numbering is noise. Don't number your points unless it would simplify the writing.
5. You cite your sources at the top, and cite page references throughout.

Here are some of my reasons for asking you to use this particular form:

1. The dominance of a school of modern philosophy called "emotivism" – which holds that the validity of one's speech is the authenticity of its expression – has undercut the discipline of logic in school. Your widespread use of the phrase "I feel that" shows that you are relying on emotivism rather than reason. You have been constantly rewarded for expressing yourself, but you have rarely been held accountable for doing so illogically. A prose outline clarifies your thinking and disciplines your writing by exposing the structure of your logic – or the lack of it – to you and to your readers. If your assertions do not bear any substantial relationship to your overall argument, then they won't fit well into a prose outline. If they have no supporting evidence, they will look as vulnerable as they really are. If your argument is imbalanced, the structure will be imbalanced.
2. Using a prose outline is an excellent way to draft a written exercise or research paper. A well written prose outline can easily and quickly be converted into standard paragraphs.
3. We constantly face temptations to cut corners when we write. The greatest source of temptation, I think, is e-mail – where spelling, capitalization, and proper grammar are sometimes taken as optional, and where emoticons ("smileys") are thought to cover a multitude of rhetorical sins. *So much of students' writing is in e-mails, chat rooms, and instant messages that these have become the predominant forms of your written expression.* When we cut corners, we forsake opportunities to improve our writing habits. When cutting corners becomes habitual, our writing actually deteriorates – not merely in e-mails, but everywhere. I can't make you write your e-mails and instant messages in English (though I wish I could). But I *can* make you write assignments that way!
4. All these skills and habits will serve you well after graduation, wherever you find yourself in life. Academic reading and writing are never merely "academic."
5. I have to read an enormous number of written assignments over the course of a semester, and you can help that experience be an exercise in edification rather than an exercise in discouragement. Someday a professor is going to go postal after reading his or her ten-thousandth hastily, sloppily, shallowly written assignment. When you ask someone to read something, whether it's a term paper or a sentence in a chat room, you are presuming on that person's time and thought. You are also enjoying an enormous opportunity to interact with another child of God using the language that we use to worship, commune, and witness. Don't squander it!

J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), lectures I and II:

Lecture I: Austin's lectures are responding to a problem: Philosophers (following Kant) assume a "statement" can only state a (verifiable) fact, truly or falsely. But many sentences are not such statements. In fact, many sentences seeming to be such statements are in fact doing something else.

One example is a "performative" (or "operative") statement, which is part of the doing of an action: "I do," "I name this ship…," "I bet…." (5-7).

A sentence like this depends on appropriate context and circumstances to work (8-9).

A potential objection: Isn't the act really inward (spiritual) and the words merely outward (physical)? Aren't words dispensable, and intentions where the action is? *Austin here uses the conventional Western definition of a sacrament.* But to dissociate the two is to defend hypocrisy! We aren't married simply because we want to be! "Our word is our bond" (10). The act of marrying is better defined as saying certain words than feeling a certain way (13).

When circumstances are lacking, the utterance is not false, but "void" (11). (One may not announce a bet after the contest is over, 14.) (But a promise made with no intention to fulfill it is not void; it is a "false promise," 11).

Lecture II: A "speech act" succeeds (is "happy") when:

A1. A conventional procedure for performing it exists;

A2. The circumstances for it are appropriate to it;

B1. The procedure is executed by all participants correctly

B2. and completely;

C1. Where feelings or intentions are involved, they are present,

C2. and where the conduct they presume actually results (14-15).

Any failure results in an "unhappy" speech-act (or "infelicity"):

Failure in A or B makes the speech-act "void"; it didn't happen. Austin calls these "misfires."

Failure in A is "misinvocation:" A1 is non-application, A2 is "misapplication."

Failure in B is "misexecution": B1 is "flaw", B2 is "hitch."

Failure in C abuses the procedure but does not void it. These are "abuses" (15-16). C1 is "insincerity," C2 is breach.

Question: What are the appropriate responses or remedies for each of these infelicities?

All conventional speech-acts, whether or not they involve words, are subject to these failures (19).

Austin closes with a question, which comes with an implication: Are truth-claims (the making of statements true, false, and nonsensical) subject to these failures? Then are *they* performative too (20)? *This would turn the tables on the philosophers who reduce meaningful language to the making of factual statements. In fact, language would be "reducible" to the "doing of things with words," to speech-acts, some of which have to do with the stating of facts.*