

Prose outlines. I have found that requiring students to write in “prose outline” form is a good step in creating healthy writing habits and reforming sloppy ones. Here’s what I mean by a prose outline:

1. The text is divided, indented, and perhaps numbered according to points, rather than in paragraphs.
2. Your points are not sentence fragments, but *complete* and *well written sentences*.
3. You sequence and indent these blocks as your points relate to each other. 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, but 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 prose outlines:

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.
2. The format is easy for me to understand, and makes it hard for you to mask incompetence or lack of understanding. If a point does not bear any substantial relationship to your overall argument, then it won’t fit well into a prose outline. If a claim has no supporting evidence, it will look as vulnerable as it really is. If your argument is imbalanced, the structure will be imbalanced.
3. 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 prose paragraphs.
4. We constantly face temptations to cut corners when we write. Think of e-mail, chats, and instant messages in which spelling, capitalization, and proper grammar are sometimes taken as optional, and where emoticons (“smileys”) are thought to cover a multitude of rhetorical sins. These are now the predominant forms of your written expression. When cutting corners in ways like these becomes habitual, our writing actually deteriorates – not merely on the Internet, but everywhere.
5. Academic reading and writing are never merely “academic.” These skills and habits will serve you well after graduation, wherever you find yourself in life.

Reading notes. Some of my classes require brief summaries of course reading. These (1) show me you truly read the reading, (2) help you interact with it and comprehend it, and (3) give you reading notes that will be accessible and easy to understand (a) when we discuss the reading, and (b) when you refer to them later (for instance, in a later paper, reviewing for an exam, or even *after the class is over!*).

Reading notes are prose outlines that

- do not merely *repeat* points in the reading, but *organize, interpret* and *respond* to them.
- pose at least one insightful (not merely definitional) question, whether for yourself or for class discussion (but not necessarily for me to answer when I’m grading them).

The following page offers an example of reading notes with annotations to explain them.

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.*

Comment: I put bibliographical information at the top so I know to what edition the page references refer.

Comment: I don't number these outlines because the indenting does the same work without the effort, the space, or the visual clutter.

Comment: Complete sentences are *much* more precise and thus easier to understand than mere phrases. They are *absolutely required* in prose outlines.

Comment: This is in quotes to show the author is using it as a technical term.

Comment: Page references are essential so you can find this information when you need it later for a paper or even after the course.

Comment: This line is indented because it develops the one above it, as do the ones that follow. Therefore the indenting exposes its logical relationship within its context.

Comment: Here Austin anticipates an objection his audience might raise so he can address it and strengthen his argument. You have to be careful to distinguish what the author is arguing and what he or she is arguing against!

Comment: The italicized sentence is my own observation, not Austin's. Italicizing makes it easier to distinguish my own thoughts from the author's.

Comment: Note how rarely I quote Austin directly! Almost the entire page is paraphrasing. That lets me condense two whole chapters without losing much content. A string of quotations would be a lot less informative and a lot less efficient. I include quotes only when they are so pithy or memorable that they are worth the space.

Comment: These notes cover two chapters in the book. This is the second.

Comment: Here I have broken one thought into a whole set of lines to expose a structure essential to Austin's overall argument, and numbered them in a way that makes the lines that follow more economical.

Comment: I quote the many terms Austin is coining in this section.

Comment: This is a question that occurred to me as I read. Questions may or may not be required in your reading notes, depending on the occasion. I may want to force you to interact with the material, or to spur class discussion, or to help you begin working with this material in the early stages of a research project.

Comment: In just one page I have communicated a lot of information. I have also left a lot out! The key to helpful reading notes is organizing, editing, and summarizing in a perceptive, accurate, clear, and helpful way.