

‘Post-Outlining’: Making Ideas Apparent in Order to Foster Collaborative Dialogue

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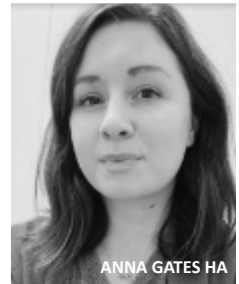
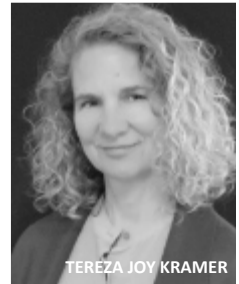
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“Is the thesis here?” a writing adviser asks a writer who’s just read her introduction aloud. “I think so,” the writer says.

“What makes you unsure?”

The writer shuffles in her seat. “It’s just ... I’m not sure if it’s any good.”

Advisers, often writers themselves, may sympathize with this uncertainty. And yet, advisers can’t, on their own, determine if another writer’s thesis is “good,” because that depends upon the assignment, the instructor, and the writer’s own goals. Enter “post-outlining”—a method to make explicit the rhetorical moves in a draft and discuss them. “Let’s underline the possible thesis, then,” the adviser might say, motioning toward the writer’s pen. “As we work through the essay, we can refer back to this—see if it’s supported.”



As the term implies, post-outlining is the practice of analyzing a work that’s already written. It offers a powerful reference point for collaborative conversation and mutual learning: both advisers and writers see what’s on the page and discuss if it meets the purpose of the piece. While there are some similarities to reverse outlining, there are also key differences, which we will explore later. Post-outlining involves auditory, visual, and kinesthetic moves, as writers hear themselves reading aloud, physically manipulate their drafts by marking them up, and use the visual annotations to analyze how to revise. Importantly, post-outlining is the foundation of our center’s practice because it incorporates collaborative dialogue and metacognitive awareness.

St. Mary’s College of California, a small liberal arts college, is a Hispanic-serving institution with a student demographic profile similar to that of public universities.¹ The Center for Writing Across the

Curriculum (CWAC) is a combined student and faculty support program. For students, our center offers two parallel services that are grounded in post-outlining: one-to-one sessions, led by student writing advisers (our name for tutors); and Writing Circles, which are structured, weekly peer-review groups of three to five students led by a facilitator who is an instructor (Kramer “Writing Circles”). Our one-to-one sessions and Circles last an hour, and all are available in person and synchronously online.

Post-outlining became a method gradually. When co-author Tereza was in graduate school, her writing center mentor Jane Cogie introduced the idea of “glossing” for main ideas. Tereza found glossing helpful for both grading stacks of composition essays and tutoring students. When she first directed a center of her own, she expanded this method to add nuances tailored to different genres and individual writers’ concerns, and she introduced it to her staff as post-outlining—invoking the idea of creating an outline “post” writing, rather than the typical pre-writing type of outline.

HOW IT WORKS

Because of its versatility, we use post-outlining in the majority of sessions with students, whether they arrive to brainstorm or to work on an incomplete or nearly finished draft. The adviser and writer begin one-to-one sessions by post-outlining the assignment prompt. The adviser guides the writer to read aloud and to mark key phrases in the prompt’s descriptive content, i.e., purpose, audience, sources, thesis, and structure. If there’s no prompt, the adviser guides the writer to list what the instructor has said about the assignment, essentially creating an informal prompt. Annotating and discussing the prompt feeds into discussing and noting the writer’s uncertainties and aspirations for the piece. All of those notes and markings become touchpoints for the rest of the session. If the writer has a draft, the writer reads aloud, stopping after each paragraph or section to identify and mark key ideas, the overarching idea, and the function. If this is the writer’s first time in our center, the adviser explains the distinction between ideas (what the paragraph is about) and function (what the ideas are intending to do, i.e., provide evidence or offer a counter argument). “What purpose does this paragraph serve in your essay?” an adviser might ask a student who struggles to identify its function. While the adviser and writer move through the draft, annotating and discussing, ideas for revision often arise. If the writer discovers that a paragraph doesn’t have an overarching idea, the writer might come up with one. If the writer discovers more than one overarching idea, the writer might divide the paragraph, or revise it so that everything in the paragraph is clearly held together by one overarching

idea. When the writer isn't sure, the adviser guides them to note their ideas or uncertainties.

After working through the entire draft in this way, the writer spreads out the pages so that all the annotations are visible. If they are working online, the writer zooms out so they can see more than one page at a time; this works best in Word, as it allows multiple pages to be viewed across the screen, while in Google Docs, only two pages can be viewed effectively because they stack on top of each other. Whether two or multiple pages can be considered at a time, this holistic view is important, as it offers a wider perspective for analyzing the organization—engaging the writer kinesthetically and visually, helping them visualize the progression of their argument as an actual shape that influences the reader and that can be rearranged. The writer might discover that the argument veers off-course midway, or that a sub-point repeats in two places. Or they might discover that their sub-arguments don't support the thesis and then decide to revise the thesis or find new evidence. If the writer says they don't know how to develop conclusions, the adviser can ask them to compare their ideas post-outlined in the introduction and the text's current conclusion, which can prompt significant thinking toward revision. Similarly, if a writer comes in with an incomplete draft, the annotations can be used as a guide to plan information which the writer could add to the draft.

Annotating is not an end in itself, but a starting point. When the writer doesn't know whether they're communicating clearly and doesn't know exactly what to question, the underlined ideas offer reference points. Similarly, when the adviser doesn't know how to guide a writer without editing, the annotations offer a focus for analysis. "Oh, this idea is here! ... Interesting ..." the adviser might say. "Yeah, you're right—that's pretty much the same as the idea on page 3. Hmm..." When the draft's ideas are illuminated, it's easier for the writer to see what is out of place. Likewise, in a Writing Circle, annotations offer a launching pad for questioning. If the peers struggle to determine why a paragraph isn't working, the facilitator can ask open-ended questions about the annotations, helping the peers analyze specifically and critically. Thus, post-outlining helps writers develop peer critiquing skills, following Muriel Harris' recommendation to not merely assign peer review but intentionally teach students how to work together (279).

We also use post-outlining to help writers improve critical reading skills or dissect model essays. Just as when working with the writer's draft, we discuss assignment goals, so we can look for particular features and mark them in the reading as we go along. By

post-outlining any text, readers come to understand the author's ideas and how they are structured and, simultaneously, learn how to critique their own writing. Material tends to stick better in the reader's mind when they engage with it in this multifaceted way, as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic pathways are all activated.

OTHER ADAPTATIONS AND POTENTIAL STICKING POINTS

Over time, many of our center's advisers and facilitators have added variations to the post-outlining method as needs arose to help writers see different aspects of texts. For instance, we added the delineation of *function* upon realizing that writers sometimes conflate key ideas with functions. Identifying functions engenders an important dimension—discussing not just the ideas but also what purpose each idea serves, i.e., its reason for existing. For example, this paragraph is about variations to the method, but its function is to introduce a new idea that supports our claim of post-outlining's effectiveness.

Another adaptation we've added is color-coding for the writer's concerns, such as repetition, balance, or development of sub-arguments in order to compare those with the underlined ideas. In a complex draft, for instance, writers can highlight each sub-argument in the introduction with a unique color, and then, throughout the draft, highlight accordingly where each sub-argument arises. Advisers can help writers combine color-coding and underlining for many purposes, such as analyzing the balance of evidence and analysis, or searching for inappropriate opinions in a science lab report. We also tailor post-outlining handouts to disciplines (some of these handouts are publicly available on the Center's website) to teach writers to look for key elements of their particular genres.

The collaborative discussion involved in post-outlining a few pages can fill up the entire hour of a typical session, so we've developed "skim post-outlining" for long drafts. Without reading aloud, the writer and adviser skim the pages while the writer underlines each topic and notes functions in the margins; then, they spread out the pages and talk about the prompt, genre-specific concerns, the progression of ideas, and the writer's goals. Besides time, there can be other logistical barriers. If a draft is printed on both sides, it's hard to spread it out in order to see the annotations holistically; it's often worth the paper and extra minutes to copy the back sides of each sheet, if a copier is available. For virtual sessions, or in-person sessions when writers bring laptops, we adapt the method by using formatting such as italics, bolding, underlining, and highlighting. As with any session in which the writer is expected to be the primary actor in the revision process, writers new to this method may be

resistant. They may struggle to identify main ideas or functions or expect the adviser to provide them. What is great about post-outlining, however, is that when a writer is hesitant or uncertain, the adviser can steer the writer back towards the text. “Well, what’s written here?” an adviser might ask. “Let’s underline it.” The adviser can model finding main ideas; this also helps the adviser not fall into editing.

Methods Similar to Post-Outlining. Topic identification, a core aspect of post-outlining, is sometimes referred to as “reverse-outlining.” Cynthia L. King, for instance, describes teaching her MBA management communication students to “identify and list the discourse topic of each sentence” to decide if the topics should be rearranged (257). Some writing centers offer handouts to help students create reverse outlines. Examples can be found at websites of Amherst College, Thompson Writing Program at Duke University, and Purdue University. These handouts suggest listing main ideas in the margins or on a separate piece of paper, rather than underlining or color coding within the draft. However, we have determined that kinesthetic interaction with the text is important: it prevents the problem of writers describing their draft and thinking an idea is in the text when it’s actually not, and it creates an annotated scheme to analyze visually when zooming out—like a map in relief mode. Additionally, many handouts on reverse-outlining deal exclusively with main ideas or topic sentences, without other layers of annotation. A small number of handouts for students, such as the one available via the Purdue OWL, do mention identifying what we term “functions,” without using the term: “In the *right-hand* margin, write down how the paragraph topic advances the overall argument of the text” (Purdue OWL). However, the post-outlining method, due to its layered strategies and its live, interactive exchange among writers, additionally provides an opportunity for collaborative dialogue that fosters metacognitive awareness.

ADVANCING METACOGNITION

Post-outlining is a valuable tool for helping writers think about what they’re doing and how they’re doing it. To place the impact of this interactive exchange into context, we refer to Jennifer Eidum Zinchuk’s four “practical teaching interventions to support students’ metacognitive development”: active learning, emotional engagement, strategy development, and integrated reflection (1-2). As do other writing center practices, post-outlining encourages active learning, rather than passivity, as writers “recognize, name, and justify their learning choices” (2) through reading aloud, marking their drafts, and discussing annotations. Writers actively arrive at realizations and make decisions based on their realizations.

Post-outlining with expert peers offers a neutral ground for rapport-building, which helps writers feel comfortable enough to consider why their drafts aren't fulfilling their ambitions. This rapport exemplifies "emotional engagement," which Zinchuk recommends: "helping students to recognize and overcome learning challenges is important to building a positive relationship with writing [...] . Celebrating learning successes as well as analyzing learning failures is invaluable for students' continued learning" (2). As writers arrive at "Ah ha!" moments during the collaborative dialogue of a session or Circle, we celebrate their successes with them. Such supportive, rapport-based discussion includes strategy development about which Zinchuk writes: "encouraging students to explicitly describe when and why particular strategies are effective, as well as introducing students to new strategies, broadens students' support network" (2). Advisers and facilitators reinforce writers' advances in their understanding of the writing process. They might respond to a writer's needs in this way, for instance: "Oh, yeah, I get that you're concerned about the thesis—if it really sets up the points you've highlighted. So great, then let's look at this handout about strong thesis statements." Because the dialogue that arises out of post-outlining is characterized by mutual exploration and learning, the teaching of strategies is woven into the session without making a big deal out of it.

Regarding Zinchuk's recommendation for integrated reflection, although she discusses creating reflective activities that are "social, active, and habitual" (1) in classrooms, we view the collaborative dialogue of post-outlining as an inherently reflective activity. Peer discussion that arises out of describing what has been underlined is characterized by reflective markers, such as, "Oh! I didn't realize that was there," and, "I see what's most important to include now," and, "Geez ... I do need to think about which sources support which points."

We conducted an assessment that identified metacognitive development after the "practical teaching intervention" (Zinchuk 1) of post-outlining in the Center. Our results, noted by Kramer et al., reveal statistically significant benefits in every learning outcome: intellectual discovery; theoretical framework; synthesis and analysis of evidence; organization; and format, tone, and style. Our assessment of student kinesiology research reports after Writing Circles shows, both quantitatively and qualitatively, that the writers improved their metacognitive regulation—their ability to think critically and communicate within their disciplines, through post-outlining (Kramer et al.).

CONCLUSION

Annotating by itself can feel like rote busy work; however, the rapport-building that occurs during post-outlining wards against this. Particularly over time, such as during follow-up one-to-one sessions or weekly Writing Circles, there are more and more moments of realization, as writers become habituated to creating and then relying upon their annotations to inspire collaborative conversation. On the best days, an observer would witness patience, trust, and metacognitive leaps, as students move toward becoming better readers, writers, discussers, and critical thinkers. Post-outlining allows writers to engage with both oral reactions and written annotations, making it more likely that writers will ultimately incorporate their global revision ideas. Gavin Bui and Amy Kong analyzed peer critique and found that students' oral feedback tends to include more comments about meaning and global issues, while written feedback tends to include more comments about surface or local issues (379). At the same time, "written feedback appeared to have a better chance of being incorporated in the later drafts compared to the oral feedback" (383). Bui and Kong's data illustrate that the annotation and dialogue which co-inform post-outlining are both essential elements of effective peer critique. Furthermore, we argue that by grounding written feedback in annotated description, the post-outlining method promotes more global-issue reflection.

When a writer post-outlines alongside another writer, the annotations become a gateway for open-ended questions—the readerly, individualized kind: "Oh wow, that's cool! Tell me more about that idea." Or, "Hmmm! that's interesting—how is that idea distinct from the one underlined in the last paragraph?" Or, "So, the assignment calls for your interpretation. Where is that here? Let's see if it's in the ideas underlined." By annotating, reading aloud, and discussing, we engage with the draft within the context of genre and the writer's goals. This is the foundation for collaborative dialogue that opens the pathways of metacognition and inspires deep, substantive revision.

NOTE

1. Both authors were recently at Saint Mary's College of California, the college this article references.

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