

The outline was supposed to have been written prior to the writing of the paper. I cheated. Not being skilled at writing outlines, I wrote the outline *after* I had written the paper. I justified this violation with the sophomoric – or was it Platonic? – argument that I couldn't know what the outline of the paper would be until after it was written. Nonetheless, writing the outline after the paper is written is not a bad idea, as a means of checking for coherence and intelligibility. If you *can* write a plausible outline from your paper, then you are sure that it has an intelligible structure. If you find that you cannot do so, then something is wrong with its structure and you should fix it.

#### 4 Successive Elaboration

One technique that my students have found very helpful for improving their writing is what I call "successive elaboration." With this technique, you begin by stating *in one sentence* the thesis or main point of your essay. In trying to formulate that one sentence, you should not be concerned with what your audience might need as background information and you needn't be shy of using technical terms. The required background information and explanation of technical terms are to be supplied in the successive elaborations. For example, you might know that you want your essay to prove this:

Some human actions are free.

Your next step is to build upon this one sentence, perhaps, by supplying the premises that you think prove it:

Some human actions are free, for humans are held responsible for some actions, and persons can be held responsible only for free actions.

Now this essay fragment should be elaborated, and it can be elaborated in a number of ways that are *suggested by the essay itself*. What is an action? What is it for an action to be free? What is responsibility? Not all of these questions need to be answered in the next elaboration, although they might be. Here's one possible elaboration:

Some human actions are free, for humans are held responsible for some actions and persons can be held responsible only for free actions.

In order to understand this argument, several terms need to be explained or defined. By a free action, I mean an action that is not caused by any event other than an act of will. By being responsible for an action, I mean an action for which a person might be praised or blamed. And by an action, I mean any change in a body or mind.

This elaboration suggests other questions and issues: Why is the issue of free will important? Why do some philosophers think that no actions are free? The elaboration of the essay fragment proceeds by trying to answer these questions, either partially or wholly. Notice that the essay, as developed so far, begins abruptly; it does not yet have an introduction. Both the question, "Why is the issue of free will important?" and the notion of responsibility in the central argument suggest an appropriate introduction. Although students often think that the introduction must be the first thing they write and the conclusion the last, it seems to me that the opposite is true more often than not. You cannot introduce a reader to where you want to take him unless you already have a clear idea of where you want to go. Now read this elaboration:

One of the most important issues for human beings is also one of the central issues in philosophy. It concerns freedom and responsibility. In this essay, I will argue that some human actions are free, for humans are held responsible for some actions and persons can be held responsible only for free actions.

In order to understand this argument, several terms need to be explained or defined. By "free action," I mean an action that is not caused by any event other than an act of will. By "being responsible for an action," I mean an action for which a person might be praised or blamed. And by "action," I mean any change in a body or mind that is caused by a motion internal to it.

The biggest obstacle to the view that some human actions are free is the belief in universal causation, that is, the view that every event is caused by some other event.

In this example of successive elaboration, I have added text to both the front and the back of the essay fragment. Often sentences need to be inserted between the existing sentences, and those sentences modified in order to accommodate the new text.

The great advantages of this method are control. The method is orderly and is not invited by some particular point of view because at each stage of the process, the student dictated the additional text; the text is earlier and hence more basic.

A student might balk at this method on the ground that it overcontrols the writing. A student might protest, "What if the proposition I formulate is wrong? If I formulate bad arguments, how can I know my thesis is wrong and not my good arguments?"

My reply is that even if a student formulates a thesis that she later finds wrong, she has arguments for it that she lost little or nothing. For, in the process of indirectly discovered the truth, she has discovered that she led other people to believe in her thesis. She has discovered that she has devised arguments the author had devised.

These are not fruitless discoveries. She can recast the essay she originally wrote in a new way. Suppose she originally wrote, "Some things exist." Suppose her basic argument was that they exist. She discovered that her reasoning was flawed. Then she might reformulate her thesis.

It is plausible that unicorns exist. This argument is not cogent. For

Often what an author discovers is that her original thesis was wrong but that her qualification or other restriction was correct. In her desire to refute determinism, she weakened her thesis too strongly as "Some things exist, thinking that breathing and thinking are the same." She weakened her thesis to "Some

The great advantages of this method of composing are order and control. The method is orderly because every addition is justified and invited by some particular portion of text. The method is controlled because at each stage of the elaboration the author knows what has dictated the additional text; at each stage the author knows what is earlier and hence more basic than other parts.

A student might balk at the process of successive elaboration on the ground that it overcommits her at too early a stage of her writing. A student might protest, "But what if I make a mistake? What if the proposition I formulate as my main thesis is wrong? What if I formulate bad arguments for my wrong thesis? And how could I know my thesis is wrong and my arguments bad unless I first have good arguments?"

My reply is that even if an author *begins* drafting an essay with a thesis that she later finds out is false, and even if she constructs arguments for it that she later determines to be spurious, she has lost little or nothing. For, in discovering that a thesis is false, she has indirectly discovered the truth: the negation of her original thesis. Further, she has discovered some arguments that might lead or have led other people to believe the false thesis, namely, the very arguments the author had devised for her original thesis.

These are not fruitless discoveries. For, if nothing else, the author can recast the essay she originally intended to write in a very simple way. Suppose she originally intended her main thesis to be "unicorns exist." Suppose her basic argument was such and such. But then she discovered that her reasoning was faulty for such and such reason. Then she might reformulate her essay in this way:

It is plausible that unicorns exist. For such and such. However, this argument is not cogent. For so and so.

Often what an author discovers in drafting is not merely that her original thesis was wrong but that it was simplistic and needed some qualification or other restriction in order to make it true. For example, in her desire to refute determinism, a student might first formulate her thesis too strongly as "All human actions are free," and then, thinking that breathing and digestion are human actions, she might weaken her thesis to "Some human actions are free."