

Outlining. 2017 Palimpsest Article.

It's midnight. Here you are again, sitting on your couch with no pants on and a cold can of Diet Coke in your hand. One minute goes by, and then another with no change; if you continue to stare at the blinking cursor on the completely white Google Doc, you know there is a pretty good chance you will be hypnotized and never get your paper done. You know that you should start writing the paper that is due at 9 a.m. tomorrow, but you glance at the Twitter tab and notice there are seven new tweets to look at.

Maybe I am just describing what *I* do the night before a paper is due, but chances are one or two of you will find yourself in the same sinking boat. Lucky for you, there is something you can do to avoid the hypnotizing glare of the blank page and blinking cursor. That something—which might bring back memories of the 10th grade literature teacher who forced it upon you—is outlining.

I have a little secret for you: Outlining does not have to be the most painful part of your paper. Personally, I find that making an outline actually makes the writing process much less painful. One of the best things about outlining is that there is not one way it must be done; the best way to outline varies from person to person.

Although it seems a little boring, I am a big fan of the standard outline form. I find this format helpful because it makes it easy to get all of my thoughts down. When preparing outlines, I like to put down the main arguments first before diving deeper into each of them. This strategy is great for those of us who don't want to forget something that might fit well later on in our paper. When you have all of your main ideas down, you can go through your sources; when you find a quote, it is easy to plug it in under whichever main point it best fits. Do this until all of your main ideas are well developed.

Branching is a great alternative to the standard outline. Branching is basically the web-like concept maps that you probably made in elementary school. First, put your main idea in a circle in the middle of a piece of paper. From there, draw an outward line and create a new circle with a supporting point; in fact, continue to draw as many lines and supporting circles as you can without referencing your notes. Draw these lines and circles until your paper resembles a spider web filled with enough information to start writing. This option can be especially helpful if you find that the standard outline format makes it difficult for you to change your original plans.

The final strategy I find useful, which is less of an outline and more of a word vomit technique, is a combination of some ideas from Anne Lamott's memoir, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. Her writing is full of humor and helpful advice, including advice on getting started. While I found everything she wrote helpful, my favorite part was the notion of "Shitty First Drafts": writing as much as you can as fast as you can. Lamott recommends writing a "Shitty First Draft" without allowing your conscience or necessity for perfect grammar to slow you down. The hope is to find a few great sentences and turn them into something beautiful.

Getting started is difficult; it is arguably one of the hardest parts of the writing process. But when you sit down the night before your paper is due and you have an outline—whether that means standard roman numerals, a branched out spider web, a shitty first draft, or any other way you are able to prepare your thoughts on a page—you'll find it much easier to begin.