What is one challenge you’ve encountered when it comes to creating or using an outline?
What’s on the menu?

1. Outlining challenges
2. Strategy: nonlinear outlining
3. Three tools for outlining nonlinearly (and how to use them)
Outlining Challenges
What is an outline?

- An ordered list of things we want to include in a piece of writing
- It’s useful! Outlines give us a roadmap to guide our drafting process
- But it can also be challenging to create and use

I. Intro
   A. something
   B. something

II. Body paragraph 1
   A. something
      1. something
      2. something
   B. something
      1. something
      2. something
         a) something
   C. something

III. Body paragraph 2
    A. etc.
Outlining Challenges

“I have tons of notes & ideas, but I don’t know which ones to include in my outline OR what order they need to go in.”

“How do I know I’ve collected ‘enough’ ideas to start outlining?”

“It feels like outlining takes too long, but I can’t start drafting until my outline is ‘perfect.’”

“I outlined it this way, so it must be important – I’ll keep it in even though it may not be relevant anymore.”

“I thought of a new idea… How the heck do I fit this into my outline?”

“Uh oh, I overestimated how much space I had and I’m running out of room. How do I remove pieces from a puzzle that’s already part of the way put together?”

“It feels like all of my ideas need to happen at once.”
The Great Outlining Paradox
The Great Outlining Paradox

Reading:

Beginning → End

Writing:

Beginning → End
The Great Outlining Paradox

- Like the reading experience, outlines are generally **linear**
- Linear outlines tend to be **rigid containers**
- Traditional outlines tend to go in only **one direction** (beginning to end)

I. Intro
   A. something
   B. something

II. Body paragraph 1
   A. something
      1. something
      2. something
   B. something
      1. something
      2. something
      a) something
   C. something

III. Body paragraph 2
   A. etc.
The Great Outlining Paradox

- Like the reading experience, outlines are generally **linear**
- Linear outlines tend to be **rigid containers**
- Traditional outlines tend to go in only **one direction** (beginning to end)
- ...But **ideas** don’t march neatly out of our heads in an orderly, linear fashion

I. Intro
   A. something
   B. something
II. Body paragraph 1
   A. something
      1. something
      2. something
   B. something
      1. something
      2. something
         a) something
   C. something
III. Body paragraph 2
   A. etc.
Traditional linear outlining can have 2 key ramifications:

1. When we try to determine what pieces to include AND what order they need to go in at the same time, we’re placing enormous pressure on our working memory.

2. When we try to create a “perfect” linear outline all in one go, it’s harder for that outline to be flexible enough when our project inevitably evolves.
Outlining Challenges

“I have tons of notes & ideas, but I don’t know which ones to include in my outline or what order they need to go in.”

“How do I know I’ve collected ‘enough’ ideas to start outlining?”

“I thought of a new idea... How the heck do I fit this into my outline?”

“Oh, I overestimated how much space I had and I’m running out of room. How do I remove pieces from a puzzle that’s already part of the way put together?”

“It feels like outlining takes too long, but I can’t start drafting until my outline is ‘perfect.’”

“I outlined it this way, so it must be important – I’ll keep it in even though it may not be relevant anymore.”

“It feels like all of my ideas need to happen at once.”
And so we need a way to outline...

1. ... that allows us to separate the collecting of ideas from the ordering of ideas (to give our brain one thing to work on at a time), and

2. ... that is flexible enough to accommodate new ideas and evolving projects, so we don’t have to get it “perfect” on the first try
Introducing: Nonlinear Outlining
Nonlinear Outlining

An approach to outlining that collects and organizes ideas in a flexible container
Nonlinear Outlining

An approach to outlining that collects and organizes ideas in a flexible container

What it is
1. Letting ideas come as they are
2. Into a flexible container (we’ll look at three!)
3. Moving those ideas around
4. Throughout the writing process

Why it’s useful
• Easier on our working memory
• Can move between big picture view and details
• Transitions (from brainstorm to outline, from outline to draft, etc.) come more organically
• Flexibility: can accommodate changes as the project evolves
Nonlinear Outlining core concept:

1. capture first
2. then organize
Why we call it “nonlinear”

**Nonlinear idea collection:** We’re collecting our ideas without worrying about a linear order

**Nonlinear idea organization:** We’re ordering ideas in a way that allows us to experiment with various structures (rather than setting a structure in stone)

**Nonlinear writing process:** We’re creating an outline that we can (a) use, (b) add to, and (c) modify – *throughout* the writing process
Three Nonlinear Outlining Tools

1. Mind Mapping
2. Index Cards
3. Spreadsheets
Tool #1: Mind Mapping
Mind Mapping

Materials: pen/pencil & paper/notebook

Step 1: Capture

- Record ideas on the page and draw lines connecting those ideas
  - Can dump all ideas first, and then draw connections
  - OR go with the flow: draw connections as they occur to you
Mind maps may begin with central node (but don’t have to)
Step 1: Capture Ideas
Step 1: Capture Ideas

You may also choose to annotate connecting lines (so you remember why ideas are connected)
Step 1: Capture Ideas

You may also choose to annotate connecting lines (so you remember why ideas are connected)
Mind Mapping

Step 2: Organize
- Add numbers to the map to mark a potential linear order
Step 2: Organize Ideas

- Recommendation: color code!
Step 2: Organize Ideas

- Recommendation: color code!
  - Use a different color to add numbers
Step 2: Organize Ideas

- Recommendation: color code!
  - Use a different color to add numbers
  - Can try out a few different potential structures by numbering in a few different colors
Assigning Order to a Mind Map

- Once you find an order:
  - You can work directly from the mind map
Assigning Order to a Mind Map

- Once you find an order:
  - You can work directly from the mind map
  - Or rewrite the outline in a linear order
Mind Mapping

When it’s useful

- For turning tangled mess into a tangible, visual blueprint
- Great for “visual” people
- Also great if you like working with pen and paper (although there are mind mapping software options)
- When you want to see the big picture
Tool #2: Index Cards
Index Cards

Materials: pen/pencil & index cards (or scraps of paper, or sticky notes)

Step 1: Capture
- Write one idea (or potential idea) on each index card
- “Idea” = concept, term, quote, point you want to make, subclaim, etc.
Step 1: Capture Ideas

Remember: **one idea per card!**

- Writing ideas on cards can be its own separate task
- OR: keep a stack of cards next to you while you read/research/brainstorm, and capture ideas as you go
Step 1: Capture Ideas

Optional color coding:
use different colored pens or mark cards with symbols/stickers to note different types or categories of ideas/notes
Step 2: Organize

- Move cards around to find potential structures
- Once you have an order, stack the cards together – and work from the stack as you draft
Option A: Group cards together and then organize those groups into an order
Option B: Shuffle and experiment with different potential structures
Index Cards

When it’s useful

- Great for visual and kinetic-oriented people who enjoy hands-on stuff
- When you want to zoom out to the big picture without getting lost in individual pieces
- When feeling overwhelmed – can lower the stakes of the outline (doesn’t feel permanent, easy to re-shuffle)
- Great option if you like pen-and-paper (but you can also apply this to digital slides, like Powerpoint, Keynote, or Google Slides)
## Tool #3: Spreadsheets

You can use a spreadsheet to outline in one column and then move right into the drafting process in the next column (and you can re-order at any point in the process).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>A</strong></th>
<th><strong>B</strong></th>
<th><strong>C</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>You can use a spreadsheet to outline in one column and then move right into the drafting process in the next column (and you can re-order at any point in the process)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><strong>Ideas</strong></td>
<td><strong>Draft</strong></td>
<td><strong>Notes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Add your ideas in this column and reorder to create your outline!</td>
<td>Use this column to begin drafting the pieces of your outline. You can always re-order the rows if you discover you need a different structure.</td>
<td>Need to remember something about this section? Drop notes here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Spreadsheets

Materials: spreadsheet program (Google Sheets recommended, but Excel or Numbers works similarly!)

Step 1: Capture
- Add one idea to each row (without worrying about order)

Step 2: Organize
- Reorder the rows as needed

There are a number of ways to customize this tool for your project and process. Let’s look at a few!
**Spreadsheets: Basic Format**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>This is the basic nonlinear outline format: write one idea per row, and then drag+drop rows into potential orders for those ideas.</td>
<td>All you need is a spreadsheet!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><strong>Outline</strong></td>
<td>You don’t need to do anything fancy to use this tool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Add your ideas in this column (one idea per row). Move rows around by dragging and dropping them until you arrive at a potential structure!</td>
<td>(But we will look at some ways to modify spreadsheets for your projects)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You can use a spreadsheet to outline in one column and then move right into the drafting process in the next column (and you can re-order at any point in the process)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideas</strong></td>
<td><strong>Draft</strong></td>
<td><strong>Notes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add your ideas in this column and reorder to create your outline!</td>
<td>Use this column to begin drafting the pieces of your outline. You can always re-order the rows if you discover you need a different structure.</td>
<td>Need to remember something about this section? Drop notes here.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Add ideas to this column

& move right into the draft

You can re-order and move rows around throughout the process
You can use a spreadsheet to move seamlessly from note-taking to outlining.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quote</strong></td>
<td><strong>Source/Pg #</strong></td>
<td><strong>Observations</strong></td>
<td><strong>Analysis</strong></td>
<td><strong>Idea/Theme/Category/Pattern</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gathering quotes to analyze? Drop them here!</td>
<td>You could create a column for citations</td>
<td>You can use this column to record your observations about the quote you collected</td>
<td>You can use this column to brainstorm potential ideas for analysis of the quote</td>
<td>You could add a column (or multiple) to note patterns or how this analysis might fit in with your argument overall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Have two potential structures in mind? You can use a spreadsheet to look at both of them at the same time.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><strong>Ideas</strong></td>
<td><strong>Organizing Principle 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>Organizing Principle 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>Notes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Add your ideas in this column</td>
<td>Use this column to assign one set of organizational categories to each idea (e.g. If I’m considering organizing my analysis based on theme, I would list which theme goes with each idea in this column)</td>
<td>Use this column to assign another set of categories (e.g. If I’m considering organizing my analysis based on level of familiarity or level of complexity, I might assign each idea a level, like &quot;low,&quot; &quot;medium,&quot; &quot;high&quot;)</td>
<td>You might use another column to work through your thoughts on connections between ideas and on the potential structures you’re considering</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Test out different organizing principles/potential structures
Spreadsheets: Tracking Projects & Progress

Or you could use a spreadsheet to track your progress on various moving parts of a project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideas</strong></td>
<td><strong>Research</strong></td>
<td><strong>Notes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop your ideas here!</td>
<td>You can use this column to collect links/citations or make notes about needed research.</td>
<td>Need to remember something about this idea? Drop notes here.</td>
<td>Keep track of what still needs to get done by adding a checklist column</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Keep track of your progress on various moving parts of a project
Spreadsheets: Customize for what you need!

- Checklist
- Ideas
- Section Titles
- Organizing Principles
- First draft
- Revisions
- Research
- Citations
- Quotes
- Observations
- Analysis
- Notes
- Whatever you need for your project!

Use whatever combination of columns makes sense for your project and your process.
When it’s useful

- To keep track of more than one dimension (columns in addition to rows)
- When you want to jump around in your process without losing your place
- If you prefer working digitally
- When you need to decide between multiple structural options (using columns or duplicating whole sheets)
- For collecting and organizing notes, and figuring out how those notes work together
- For moving from outline to draft (can copy/paste draft cells into a word processor document)
Recap: Nonlinear Outlining

➔ Capture first!
➔ Then organize!
➔ Use a flexible container
  ◆ Mind Mapping
  ◆ Index Cards
  ◆ Spreadsheets
Which of these tools (mind mapping, index cards, spreadsheets) do you want to try for your next/current project?

What’s exciting about it? What feels daunting? Do you have any questions before you try it?
What is one thing you will take away from this workshop to apply to your next writing project?
References & Further Reading
