

Crafting an Effective Outline

By Midnight

A Writer's Greatest Weapon: The Outline

Sometimes a writer's greatest struggle isn't *creating* the characters, plot, or conflict in their stories, but *enacting* them in a coherent, effective way. This is where an outline can be a writer's true lifeline. One of the many benefits of an outline is that it's a universal tool and compatible with various writing endeavors, whether you're trying to craft a novel, screenplay, or comic book script.

Most writers adhere to either two methods when approaching a new story. One is the outline process, and the other is what some call the "crisis method." Supporters of the crisis method refuse to plot their stories in advance, rejecting the "restrictions" of an outline, while relying on mood, inspiration, and on-the-spot creativity to write their story in a more "organic" fashion. There is no right or wrong way—and there are successful authors who *do* prefer the crisis method. However, many others adhere to the outline approach, due to the assurance it provides as a "backbone" for one's story.

In *How to Write Tales of Horror, Fantasy & Science Fiction*, J.N. Williamson states that, "Good plots happen, more often than not, because of well-planned outlines." And in John Gardner's book, *On Becoming a Novelist*, he writes in support of outlines, saying, "Sooner or later the writer has no choice but to figure out what he's doing."

This isn't to say that once the outline is done, a writer must follow it as if it's written in stone. Think of an outline as a fluid piece of work, ever-changing, where massive chunks can be revised, moved around, or cast aside outright. Struggling with how to rework an outline is always a preferable quandary than getting a badly-timed case of writer's block and lacking any structured ideas to fall back on.

Advantages of the Outline

There are numerous advantages to working from an outline. It can be essential to keep your characters and story on track, while also avoiding opportunities for meaningless digression. They also help to keep your stories *moving*. When you look at your final outline, it should be easy to see the connecting plot points, moments of character development, and scenes where conflict inevitably arises. This can be helpful in pacing out action sequences, or keeping other scenes from playing out too long. Will you be

introducing a new character in Chapter 9, but won't flesh out their back story until Chapter 32? Maybe you don't want to wait that long? If so, alterations in the outline stage will always be easier than rewriting lengthy sections of a manuscript later. It can't be stressed how important story pacing is, and outlines can serve as a miracle worker in that department.

Another advantage of outlines is being able to avoid the dreaded roadblocks that come with using the crisis method and making up the story as one goes along. For example, let's say your unarmed protagonist is being chased by a gang of gun-toting villains. He's reached the top floor of a skyscraper and has been cornered. His only option? Jump out the window...but the ground is forty stories below. It's an exciting scene, but a writer's options for a plausible solution may be limited if they come to a situation like this. And it's surprisingly easy to work yourself into a bind when *not* using an outline. Of course, our intrepid protagonist may be lucky enough to grab hold of a ledge on the way down, or conveniently drop into an awning, but there's only so many times a reader will buy such opportune escapes.

A source of contention among some writers is if a story's ending should be planned in advance. There are writers who believe that by *not* mapping out a climax, your story will take on a more natural, less-forced approach. Others feel that by already knowing your ending, a writer can work to foreshadow elements and build towards a more satisfying conclusion.

Personally, I've found that planning the big finale in advance is always *immensely* helpful. For example, in Chapter 1 of the *Danger Zone One* comic—at the very end—rookie police officer, Reena Saffron, uses a stun gun to electrify the water that deactivates a rampaging power suit. Earlier in the story, she alludes to the fact that she's more comfortable with a stun gun than a standard firearm. Her comment wasn't shoehorned into the story for no reason. In fact, it served both as foreshadowing and as a set-up for the eventual climatic payoff. This is often easier when working from an outline, as opposed to creating your story on the spot.

Outline Formats: Synopsis Outlines vs. Breakdown Outlines

Not every outline is created equal and there are countless ways a writer may want to structure one. For this tutorial, we'll examine two methods that can be effective.

A more “free-flow” style of outline consists of writing your story out in a summary/synopsis format. These can range in length and detail—some writers may opt for a two or three page outline synopsis, while other might feel the need to write thirty pages, diving into more in-depth aspects of their characters and the world they inhabit.

Below is a synopsis outline for my novel, *Galaxy Runner*. This was a very early synopsis draft,

which I later expanded using the “breakdown outline” method we will look at next.

GALAXY RUNNER

SYNOPSIS

ORION DARKSTARR and the rag-tag crew of the starship GALAXY RUNNER are known throughout the galaxy as notorious space pirates. However, despite their infamous acts of thievery, they abide by the 'Pirate Code' and never resort to taking a human life. After stealing Petro Diamonds from a heavily guarded cargo shuttle, Orion and his crew make a daring escape that leads them to the planet Titan.

Orion is initially reluctant to go to Titan, due to memories of a tragic childhood on the planet, but with the Galaxy Runner in dire need of repairs, he's left with no other option. After landing on the surface, a surprising discovery is made—all the Petro Diamond crates are empty, save for one crate containing a small, locked capsule.

Meanwhile, CANIS ELNATH, the chief of Galaxy Enforcement, is informed of the mysterious capsule's contents by a Chancellor from the Ivago star-system. Despite it being a time of peace in the galaxy, a biological weapon was secretly created by Ivago scientists in the event galactic war ever erupted throughout the seven star-systems. The hijacked cargo shuttle had been covertly transporting the bio-weapon and, should it be activated, all life in the entire galaxy will be put at risk. Chief Elnath orders every Galaxy Enforcement officer to track down Orion, along with tacking a bounty on the infamous space pirate's head.

Word of the bounty spreads fast and Orion encounters one of the bounty hunters on Titan. Barely escaping the skirmish, Orion prepares to round up his crew and leave the planet. Unfortunately, Galaxy Enforcement converge on Titan and Orion is separated from his comrades during the siege. Orion orders his crew to take off with the Galaxy Runner to save themselves and the ship. However, this leaves Orion stranded on the planet, with the capsule still in his possession.

Hunted down on Titan's surface, Orion receives help from an unlikely ally—CORD, a young orphan boy who dreams of leaving the planet and becoming a space pirate. The boy's story mirrors Orion's own lonely youth on Titan, and the pirate accepts Cord's help. Together they begin rebuilding an old starship that Cord had been working on in an abandoned spaceport. While Orion and Cord are working on repairing their cobbled-together starship, the Galaxy Runner's crew is arrested by the galactic authorities and taken to Galaxy Enforcement headquarters where they are detained and

interrogated.

With their starship now functional, Orion and Cord leave the planet—but their success is short lived. The two are captured by RADNOCK DISCORDIA, a man from Orion's past who has also turned to a life of space piracy. However, unlike Orion and his 'Pirate Code', Radnock is driven by an insatiable bloodlust. Orion and Cord manage to escape Radnock's starship, but not before Radnock gains possession of the capsule.

Learning that his friends are being held at Galaxy Enforcement headquarters, Orion pulls off a bold rescue, freeing them, and getting the Galaxy Runner back. Radnock shows up at Galaxy Enforcement HQ as well, demanding a hefty ransom for the return of the capsule. Chief Elnath concedes to the pirate's demands, but Radnock double crosses the authorities, obtains the ransom money, and keeps the capsule.

Orion, aware that Radnock's psychotic tendencies know few bounds and that he'd be likely to *use* the bio-weapon, tracks his former associate down. The Galaxy Runner engages Radnock's starship in combat. The two ships are heavily damaged and, on the verge of defeat, Radnock opens the capsule in a last ditch suicide attempt to spread the bio-weapon's contents across the galaxy. Thanks to Orion's fast thinking and the capable skills of his crew, including their newfound member, Cord, they are able to redirect Radnock's ship into a black hole. Radnock is sucked into the dark void, along with the virus before it can spread.

Aware that Orion prevented a galactic catastrophe, Chief Elnath allows the Galaxy Runner to escape. Later, aboard the Galaxy Runner, Orion officially welcomes Cord to his crew and is already planning their next great adventure.

The above *Galaxy Runner* synopsis is short and to the point, but provides the necessary framework for me to build from there. One of the advantages to this particular outline format is that you may occasionally have agents, managers, or production/publishing companies who want to read a synopsis of your work *prior* to seeing the finished manuscript/screenplay/comic script. With a synopsis outline, you can already provide it to the requesting party, without having to write one up at the last minute.

Let's now take a look at the breakdown outline approach. This method is used as a more meticulous option, often delineating chapters with specific events.

What follows is a borrowed example of a breakdown outline for an unpublished novel, *The Warlocks*:

THE WARLOCKS

Cast: Vic Moon — private detective, our disgruntled ‘hero’
Andy Kerr — ex-cop, consultant on various cults
Rebecca Hodges — a “white” witch, friend of Kerr
Slade — occult celebrity, advisor to “The Warlocks” band
Lucretia — works for Slade, criminal background
Johann Trent — televangelist in league with cult
The Warlocks band members — Death, Ripper, Skull, Mephisto, Ax

Outline:

Prologue — Open with sacrificial murder of young groupie
Ch. 1 — Moon receives case from victim’s parent (cops were unable to solve murder), Moon meets Andy, gets briefing; they go to concert
Ch. 2 — Split POVs with “The Warlocks” in concert
Ch. 3 — Split POVs, across town at the Trent televangelist revival
Ch. 4 — Sacrifice of groupie from the new concert audience
Ch. 5 — Moon/Andy at murder scene; interact with cops
Ch. 6 — Andy takes Moon to meet Rebecca, discuss local cults
Ch. 7 — Intro. Slade, holding ritual for band members
Ch. 8 — Split POVs: Andy solo investigation, Moon/Rebecca tour underground “cult clubs”
Ch. 9 — Regroup with Andy; hear Trent on televangelist radio station
Ch. 10 — Lucretia at second concert, picking victims
Ch. 11 — Split POVs: Moon attends “white” witch coven with Rebecca
Ch. 12 — Trent meets with Slade; payoff and strategy session
Ch. 13 — Lucretia conducts graveyard ritual, one of the victims try to escape
Ch. 14 — Rebecca has falling out with Moon, investigates solo; alerts Lucretia by accident
Ch. 15 — Slade and Lucretia move against “outsiders” (ie, Moon, Andy, Rebecca)
Ch. 16 — Andy lured into ambush, manages to escape; goes to visit Rebecca
Ch. 17 — Rebecca abducted by Lucretia, Andy wounded but warns Moon
Ch. 18 — Moon grills members of “The Warlocks” for info
Ch. 19/20 — Showdown with cultists; Moon rescues Rebecca, Lucretia rats on Trent’s televangelist cover story

Ch. 21 — Moon subdues both Slade and Lucretia; exposes Trent as mastermind of occult murders

Epilogue — Moon visits Andy in hospital; leaves with Rebecca for “R&R”

What you see above is a fairly simplistic approach to a breakdown outline. However, don't let this stop you from making your outline more detailed. For example, you may want to go further in-depth for certain scenes, like so:

Chapter 8

- A) Andy interviews his contacts in the underground
- B) Rebecca leads Moon on a tour of occult ships and hangouts
- C) Magic shop proprietor phones contacts to report that “someone” is investigating occult practitioners

Another method, which can be helpful, is adding bits of dialogue to an outline. Maybe you really want a character to say a certain line (or it has some important bearing on the plot), then be sure to add that into the outline as well.

Though eager writers might want to jump into their latest story and start knocking out pages from the get-go, the benefits an outline can afford will more than make up for the time spent to craft one—and can ultimately be the key to a finely structured piece of writing.