Reverse Outlining

Suggested grade/ age: 9th

Approximate time needed to complete lesson: Two 56-minute class periods

Learning objective(s) and significance of lesson:
This lesson is important because it prepares students for the state writing test that they are required to pass to graduate high school in Minnesota. Additionally, the organizational skills a reverse outline develops helps students with any kind of formal writing they need to do for school or work. I share personal stories of organizational success that I have had in my own life to help reinforce the point that this skill will transfer beyond the classroom. Ideally, the reverse outline helps students see how a piece is organized post-writing to inform the pre-writing of their next piece.

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to...

1. complete a reverse outline.
2. understand the difference between an organized and disorganized personal essay.
3. see how to organize their personal essays in the pre-writing stage.

In terms of "best practice," I incorporated three things. I included front-loading for the assignment. I want students to understand why they are being asked to do this and how it will help them be better writers. I give them personal anecdotes about how I wrote well for school and work, and also how taking time away from writing can benefit a writer. I also scaffolded the lesson so that students would get guidance from me before working with other classmates, and then ultimately, their own first essay. I also had other student examples that helped clarify the concepts I was asking them to try. I have learned that these examples also demystify the essay for my students because they are reading the words of their peers. Finally, I encourage the use of the word "oops" when students recognize an error in an essay, their own or someone else’s. I do this because I want them to "play" with their writing. When we play, or practice, we often make mistakes to perfect a given skill. I think that using this word helps remind the students that their writing skill is developing and mistakes are expected and not to be avoided.
Brief summary/outline of lesson:
I implement this lesson with the help of the four other 9th grade English teachers in my Professional Learning Community. As a group we assign and grade the first practice essay in early February. Collectively, this allows us to talk about what we value in “good writing” and pinpoint areas of weakness for our students.

I ask students to complete a reverse outline for their February essay in March. They review their earlier essay after direct instruction from me about the various components of the state scoring guide and examination of several example essays. This lesson helps build to two culminating assignments: another practice essay for a class assignment and the actual state writing test in early April.

We begin by making a reverse outline of a student essay as a class. I use the Barack Obama essay because it earned a score of 4. After reading the essay, I have put a reverse outline form on the Smartboard, and the students help me complete it. I model how I want them to write down when making their own reverse outlines.

After we complete the initial reverse outline, I randomly pair them up, assign them a new student essay, and have them complete another reverse outline. We come back together after this exercise for them to share their observations with the class.

Then I return to them their February practice essays. Students are shocked to read their words after only a month and a half away from it; it seems like they are reading someone else’s words. Their homework is to make a reverse outline of their own essays and write me a letter of reflection about the process. I like to read what they learned about themselves as writers in coming back to their own work after a break and after acquiring a new tool to examine the organization of their writing.

Since using the reverse outline, the second practice essays have become stronger. They know how to pre-write effectively and organize their essays much better. Our collective observation as a ninth grade team has been that we are reading fewer “just passing” essays and reading more “above average” and “good+” essays after students reverse outline their own work.

Here is data to that outlines its success:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>January</th>
<th>March</th>
<th>April: State Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*2009</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*2010</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>Not known as of July 2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Related Resources:**
*Teaching Adolescent Writing* by Kelly Gallagher (2007)

Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab: [HYPERLINK http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/689/01/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/689/01/)

**Possible extensions or adaptations for different purposes/student needs:**
For elementary teachers, you could have students reverse outline a paragraph. I have heard this called “unpacking a paragraph.”

For narrative writing, students could measure their own stories against a plot diagram to see what elements they have or need to include.

High school students could do this with any formal writing in which a particular structure is expected from their teacher.

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