

# **How to Write Better Compositions by Using the Outline Method**

The typical student begins writing his composition by taking out a sheet of paper, putting his name on it, a title, and then, after much excruciating agony, a sentence. Once that sentence is written, he sits and thinks for while, and thinks and thinks and thinks. Finally he writes another sentence. Thinks. Writes another sentence. Thinks, thinks, thinks, and then writes yet another sentence.

Rarely do these sentences have much to do with each other. They don't hang together. They are just totally unrelated sentences. And the typical student feels like quitting the moment he has put together six or more sentences on the same topic.

Occasionally, students will be able to write fairly good compositions using this method—which is the only method they know. In a way, it's difficult to blame them because all through grade school and junior high they have never had any systematic teaching of how to write. And we can't blame their teachers, because they haven't had any systematic training in how to write or in how to teach students to write.

Most students have never had any training in composition beyond being asked to complete composition assignments such as: "What did you do during your summer vacation?"

Okay, let's suppose that this topic is your first assignment. What should you do?

Well, first things first. We get our pencil and paper. We sit down—but what we don't do is just sit until we have our first sentence written. In fact, using the outline method, we won't write any sentences at all for a while. What we do is simply jot down ideas as fast as they pop into our heads. The piece of paper we start out with may quite easily end up looking something like the list that appears on the very next page.

- swimming
- loafing around
- sleeping late
- housework
- movies
- visit Detroit
- no homework
- no teachers
- reading magazines
- reading books
- repairing car
- basketball
- ball game
- speeding ticket
- parties
- boring
- drive-ins
- a fight
- golf
- drag races

After we have jotted down everything we can think of that we might possibly include in a paper, we try to figure out some way to organize it. We could, for example, organize it by likes and dislikes. We could mark each item with an L that we like and each item we dislike with a D. After doing this, we would probably find out that this method of organizing doesn't work out so well because only housework, speeding ticket, and boring we marked with a D.

So we would have to find another way of grouping these ideas. One way is by types of activities, like this:

<b>Day time fun:</b>		<b>Night time fun:</b>	
swimming	loafing	swimming	movies
sleeping late	reading	drive-ins	parties
golf	basketball	drag races	

Left now are the following items:

~~swimming~~  
~~loafing around~~  
~~sleeping late~~  
**housework**  
~~movies~~  
**visit Detroit**  
**no homework**  
**no teachers**  
**reading magazines**  
**reading books**  
**repairing car**  
~~basketball~~  
**ball game**  
**speeding ticket**  
~~parties~~  
**boring**  
**drive-ins**  
**a fight**  
~~golf~~  
~~drag races~~

At this point, the outline is just about finished. It doesn't have to be in a formal polished state, unless, of course, the teacher has asked for one — which is rare. Of course, this kind of outline can't be turned in. We would have to follow our teacher's pattern.

However, for writing purposes, our outline is complete. All we have to do is think of a good lead-in sentence and some way to use some of those "left-out" items.

So, we look back at our outline and find the items: no homework and no teachers. Inspiration strikes, and now the composition writes itself:

(See following page)

## My Summer Vacation

My summer vacation wasn't boring even though I didn't have any teachers and didn't have any homework. My days seemed filled with all kinds of fun, except when my mother would try to get me to work around the house, or when my dad would try to get me to wash his car or give it a tune-up.

At least two or three times a week my buddy and I would drive out to Long Lake and go swimming. On Tuesdays we would play some golf—if you can call what we played golf!

If it rained, we either played cards or just sat around the house, loafing away the time. And, if things got boring—which they sometimes did—I would get a good mystery novel and sit down and read just for the fun of it.

After supper, we quite often cruised the drive-ins trying to see how many of our friends we could meet. Some nights my buddy would take his car. On other nights I would take mine. And it was almost always a lot of fun, except when I saw that red light flashing behind me one night. That speeding ticket grounded me for a week.

And, of course, there were quite a few parties that we went to, as well as a few drag races. About these I could write for a long, long time, but I refuse to write any more on the grounds that I might tend to incriminate myself.

Now, this is not the world's greatest paper, but it will certainly get a passing grade. And, who knows, it might even get an A or a B from some teachers. But the best part about writing a paper like this is that it is easy to write if we just first jot down ideas as fast as we can on a piece of paper. Once we have all our ideas in front of us, we can usually find a way to organize them. Some of our ideas we may not want to use. Good! This is why this type of outline is practical. *We* see it. Nobody else sees it. We use it because it works. Once we can see all our ideas down on paper, our real paper becomes a breeze—well, almost a breeze—to write.