



OTTAWA VIA 101

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I'm going to tell you how to get to Ottawa today, and make yourself look good. Stick with me, kid, and you'll learn something. It's all about planning, structure, and the fine art of faking it.

First, what is structure? It is the internal logic of an essay, and without it, you're sunk. Why? Because it is what guides the reader through your work. Like everyone and their freakin' mother in this publication will tell you, writing is a journey. And if writing is a journey, structure is your map. Without it, the reader can become lost in your words, which can be a wonderful thing, but can be detrimental to your goal. This brings up the question of what *is* your goal. Ideally, it is communication. Communication is the goal of writing. Now writing can serve other goals, easily, but without the communication portion, you're sunk. You just stayed up all night, pounding back the coffee, the booze, the whatever, for no good reason beyond killing a tree or three. And let me tell you, the more trees you kill, the more you need structure.

Wha? Yeah. The bigger the paper you are writing, the more you need to help your poor reader through your thought process. For example, if you are writing a sentence, you don't need to say, "In this sentence, I'm going to discuss 'structure in a sentence.'" However, if that sentence is seventy pages long, your reader is going to be lost without some guidance.

So you're sold on the idea of using a deliberate structure in your paper. Or at least you've gotten a barely legible scrawl from your faculty that you need more structure, and you want that credit, so here you are, reading this essay. Here's the hard part: actually finding some structure. You've got a few tools at your disposal. You can write a five paragraph theme (intro, thesis, support, support, support, conclusion, including pithy restatement of your thesis), which is fine if you don't mind writing an essay whose form came about roughly three thousand years ago (I'm not exaggerating). You can find a logical order for your essay, and this is a little trickier, because there is no real answer for where to find that logic.

You can pick one of the old standbys, and if it's ten o'clock at night, and you need a paper by nine in the morning, I highly encourage this. They're the ones like spatial (good for describing things—left to right, up to down, clockwise—for example: if you were describing the changes made to a shopping mall and how that affects the consumers, making them long to purchase useless crap), chronological (excellent for history: begin at the beginning and end at the end), comparison

(combined with one of the others, for example: chronological and comparison would be France compared with Spain in 1830, then France compared with Spain in 1945), and degree (big to little, unimportant to important—good for ideas and other abstractions).

But these are certainly not the only structures out there. Any logic works. I personally would love to see an essay arranged by the spectrum red to orange to yellow and so forth, creating the good ol' ROYGBIV. It doesn't really matter. What you need to remember though, is your poor reader. Structure is order, and order is what makes sense. Let's say you're writing an essay on how to drive a car. Please start with how to turn it on (and when you talk about turning, you need to talk first about how to signal, not after).

But at the same time, keep your writing to the point: don't tell me how pushing down the little knobby thing causes a piece of metal to touch another piece of metal that sends a little baby bit of electricity to another piece of metal. Remember your goal: to communicate with your reader, and in this case the information being communicated is how to drive a car, not how to rewire a turn signal.

Is this making sense to you? Let's work with the driving analogy, pull back the lens a bit. As I snidely pointed out at the beginning, the essay is a journey, and the structure is your map. It doesn't matter where you start, and it doesn't matter where you stop. If you are starting in Olympia and you want to go to California, you can take 101, or you can take I-5, or you can take a hundred little windy paths, but you probably can't get there through Ottawa. For example, let's return to driving: let's say you went for a drive: you can look at a map and trace your route ahead of time, carefully planning where you're going to take your breaks and get gas (outlining would be the writing equivalent), or you can just drive, and when someone asks you why you're in Ottawa, you can say that this is where you meant to go all along (this would be freewriting, and then writing an introduction at the end of the writing process). So, to follow the analogy, structure is the fine art of proving you meant to be in Ottawa all along.

And the great part about writing is that you give the reader the map and the journey at the same time, so no one ever need know that you're full of it and just totally made up the structure and faked the start of the paper so that it looks like you planned it all the time. A real example? I inserted the line about everyone and their mothers and the essay as a journey at the beginning, right before writing this paragraph. So fake it and enjoy, or plan it and be smug, but, for the love of Mike, do it.