

Fine-Tuning Your Plan

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Once you've completed a first pass of your outline, see if you can make some improvements.

1 First, consider the scenes in your outline with an eye toward viewpoint. Is every scene told from the same point of view (yours or another narrator's)? Or are there scenes that suddenly skip to another character's perspective? The easiest way to deal with the question of viewpoint is to decide up front who the narrator of your story will be (chances are it will be you, which makes your job that much easier), and then make sure that you describe each and every scene from that narrator's point of view.

If you have scenes that you cannot tell from first-hand experience, you may be able to recast them as anecdotes told to you. Let's say, for example, that you are writing your personal memoir but have included in your outline the scene of your parents' first meeting. You've established yourself as the viewpoint "character," but here is a story you can't tell from your own memory. You might choose to retell the story as your mother related it to you. If so, then you must tell the details of the scene from her viewpoint and hers alone, although you should "frame" the scene with some material that establishes you as the narrator.

For example, I have always had difficulty with the concept of "love at first sight," but my mother was a firm believer. She never tired of telling the story of when she and Dad met, how she practically tripped over him as she wandered around that huge cold library looking for anything remotely resembling the psychology stacks: "He looked so scholarly and mature, hunched over that pile of books, frowning with concentration," Mom would say. "I thought I'd sink through the floor when I bumped into him; I was sure he'd scold me for being so clumsy. But he just looked at me with those baby blues of his, and right then I knew he was the one." Mom would get this faraway look in her eyes and I would envy her that certainty, that little leap of the heart that told her this was the real thing. And always I wondered if it would ever happen to me.

You may not be writing any scenes in this much detail right now, but you should at least be able to identify those scenes that will break from the main viewpoint and start thinking about how you want to deal with them.

2. Now evaluate your outline for a sense of unity. Look for any scenes that seem to wander from the main path, or that seem disruptive to the flow of the story. In order to do this effectively, you must have a strong sense of your book's scope, theme, and intended reader.

Let's say, for example, that you have described your book as "the story of how my parents managed, even through extreme hardship, to keep their marriage and family together." You've decided to begin your book with the story of your parents' arrival at Ellis Island as newlyweds and end it with their 50th wedding anniversary celebration.

The theme of your book—the point you most want to make about your parents' lives—is that a marriage can remain strong even through the most difficult of times, if the couple is willing to work hard at it. In your outline you've included a scene that describes your father walking you to school on your first day, one that depicts your mother's emotional state after a miscarriage, and—close to the end—a scene detailing all the planning you and your siblings did to give your parents a grand celebration for their anniversary.

As much as these scenes may say about you, your parents, and your siblings, do they really speak to the theme you've identified? Maybe so, if, for example, your mother's miscarriage threatened the stability of the marriage. But if the scene of your father walking you to school is simply a pleasant personal memory, it probably doesn't belong.

These will be hard choices to make, but if you look at your outline with a critical eye now, and cut the extraneous material, you will be much better equipped to resist the temptation to wander down these paths later, when you start writing. And you will start writing—right now, if you haven't already.