Roadmapping

When you “roadmap” an essay, you track its argument from the beginning of the essay to the end, paragraph by paragraph, in order to produce a condensed version of that argument. This version allows you to see the key claims of the argument as they are sequenced in the essay and to evaluate the logic of the sequence as a whole.

For example, you can roadmap someone else’s argument by summarizing the contents of each paragraph in a sentence or two, perhaps using key phrases from the paragraph to make the condensed version more faithful to the original. This kind of roadmap is useful for breaking down a complex argument into its constituent parts, so that you can see what all it contains and how the parts fit together. The “Structure” video entitled “Wesley’s Roadmap” features this kind of roadmap—the kind that requires you to be an attentive reader of someone else’s argument.

But the most useful kind of roadmap is an “after-the-fact” outline that you compile out of your own essay draft. A conventional outline offers only a preliminary plan: it sketches out what each part of the essay will discuss—that is, each section’s subject or topic. But in a roadmap, the idea is to outline what each paragraph argues—the main idea or message each paragraph conveys to the reader. If a roadmap of your essay draft reveals a paragraph that does not convey a distinct idea or message, then you need to go back to the drawing board for that piece of your argument. Or if your ideas are out of sequence, your roadmap should make this clear to you.

Here’s what a conventional outline of a paper about Christopher Columbus might look like:

1. Introduction
2. Columbus’s greed
3. His obsession with gold
4. His obsessive language
5. The pitiable Columbus
6. Conclusion

This outline is a listing of broad topics and little else. It reveals nothing of the argument that will hold those topics together, perhaps because the logic of the argument hasn’t been worked out yet. By contrast, here’s what a roadmap of the argument in draft form might look like:

1. Columbus is typically considered a greedy entrepreneur.
2. His journal provides good reasons to see him as greedy.
3. But this reading misconstrues his character; he’s less greedy than obsessed.
4. In fact, Columbus’s language is that of a nearly demented individual.
5. His obsession may have been conditioned by his political environment.
6. Because he’s obsessed, he should be pitied, not condemned.
7. Those who criticize his avarice are too simplistic in their reading.
8. Our judgment of Columbus should be tempered by sympathy for his illness.

It may be an outrageous argument, but this *orderly arrangement of key claims* shows its logic. Such a roadmap relies on a single-sentence summary of each paragraph’s main idea; hence it is generally known as a *topic idea outline*. Creating such an outline from your essay draft enables you to determine whether or not you’ve achieved a firm logical sequence in the argument you’ve worked out thus far. This determination gives you a head start on the revision of your essay.