Thesis and Outlining

The first step in creating an outline is to write a ***thesis.*** This is simply putting your book idea in a nutshell. This process goes all the way back to the ancient Latin writers. They had a three-part formula for creating a thesis: *an sit*, *quid sit* and *quale sit*. For those who don't speak Latin (including myself), the translation is: *whether it is*, *what it is* and *what kind it is*.

1. **Whether It Is.** Does "it" (your idea) exist? How do we know it does? How can we identify it? In other words, a good way start boiling down your idea is to seemingly shoot yourself in the foot — question whether it's true at all! (Do you remember how I introduced this class?) Then decide that if it is true, there has to be reasons why. The *an sit* step has the potential to bring the element of *controversy* into your thesis — and in this case, that's a good thing.

2. **What It Is.** How is it defined? How is it different? How is it the same? By defining what your topic is, you get at the *essence* of the thing. Be clear and concrete; this is no place to get metaphoric! Avoid using a form of the same term to define a term ("a poet writes poetry"). And avoid using a negative statement in defining ("a poet is not a prose writer").

3. **What Kind It Is.** What categories does it fit in? What are its qualities? This is the step at which you *should* use the negative, and you *should* use metaphors and similes.

This exercise may lead you to wonder if you really know *anything* about the topic of your book. Don't let that discourage you; let it drive you back to further brainstorming and researching.

Different Books, Different Structures

No book outline is entirely unique — and you wouldn't want it to be. The chapters and sections should follow a familiar, logical progression, or the reader is apt to get lost and stop reading. This logical progression will vary, however, according to the type of book:

Biography: chronological and/or topical

Devotional: daily/weekly sections with standard format, such as Scripture / commentary / prayer

Christian Living: definition, distinctions, application, conclusion

How-to: identification, materials needed, step-by-step instructions, evaluation/recap

Exposé: revelation, specifying errors, show results of errors, present alternative