

Writing For Children and Teens - Should You Outline Your Story Before Writing?

By [Maurene Janiece](#)

Part of the writing process is experimenting. Writers differ on their opinions about outlining--some love it, some hate it, and some are mixed. The decision to outline is a personal one. You need to determine what works best for you. Some writers cannot write without an outline, while others like to jump in and "see what happens." Some will have the plot up to a certain point, and then write the ending as it comes, not forcing it to go one way or the other. In contrast, some writers start from the ending and work backward to ensure that all the pieces are there that lead up to the end. (This works particularly well with mysteries or stories that have some type of surprise ending.)

Keep in mind that outlines DO tend to change, as do characters as you write more and get to know them better. Yes, characters are known for taking on lives of their own. Many people find that it is best to let the character lead them, as trying to force a character to do something that is not in his or her nature simply does not work (and leads to rewriting it all anyway). Again, it is a personal preference. As you saw with the character profiles, there are several ways to get to know your characters.

An outline does not have to be the standard formats you may remember from school. There are many different ways to visually plot your story. Many writers use sticky notes, or colored note cards, as these can be moved around as needed to show plot progression. Others use spreadsheets with each character or thread listed down the side, and the plot lines across the top. I like to use a big roll of butcher paper. I plot the story across the top, for as long (literally) as it takes on the paper. I then list the actions underneath each chapter or primary scene. This is just a larger version of the spreadsheet. I also use a lot of colored Sharpie pens. And of course, there's a traditional outline format. If you "Google" outline, you will find lots of examples.

Remember that writing involves a lot of rewriting, no matter if you use a detailed outline and notes or if you "wing it." Keeping this in mind may help you feel more relaxed about letting things change as they need to so that the story can evolve as it needs to, while allowing required events to remain in place so that your ending makes sense when you (and your readers) arrive.

Maurene Janiece is a writer of young adult fiction. She holds an MFA in Writing for Children and Teens from Vermont College and has taught creative and composition writing at the high school and college levels. She offers advice for new writers and provides manuscript critiques through her website. She has published several nonfiction books as Maurene J. Hinds.

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