

The Ultimate Outline: a step-by-step guide

By Alex Epstein

Follow these steps in this order and you will dramatically increase your chances of overcoming the fundamental challenge of writing: to create real context change in a reader's mind.

As a working example I will use the process of outlining The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels. *Examples from that process are in italics.*

Identify the purpose: What do you want to happen in the world as a result of creating this piece?

Persuade ambitious citizens who have been taught to think of fossil fuels as a planet-destroying addiction to be restricted that they are in fact a life-enhancing product to be liberated.

Identify the subject: What is the area of reality you're making a new identification about?

Fossil fuel use.

Identify the theme: What is the fundamental identification (change in context) you want the reader to understand?

- The subject should be the grammatical subject of the theme. The subject plays the subject role in the sentence, the identification is the predicate.
- If story, plot-theme: the essential story of how you came to your theme (if it's an opinion story) or an illustration of your theme (a thematic story).
 - Opinion story: *I became passionate and persuasive about fossil fuel freedom by applying a human-flourishing based framework to the facts.*
 - Illustration (chapter 1): *Fossil fuel doomsayers have been making radically wrong negative predictions about fossil fuel use for decades with no loss in public credibility.*

Fossil fuel use is indispensable to the future of human flourishing.

Identify the opposing theme or themes: What are the fundamental wrong identifications that are in opposition to yours?

Fossil fuel use is a planet-destroying addiction.

Identify the audience's context: What does the audience know (that you can work with), what misconceptions have they been exposed to (that you have to subtract or modify), and what do they value?

- Use the Extreme Clarity tool!
 - Examples of misconceptions the reader has been exposed to.

- *Framework: Lack of clarity about standard of value, default to “green,” unchanged nature standard of value.*
- *Framework: Tendency to look at negative context of fossil fuels and nuclear.*
- *Fossil fuel use is causing catastrophic resource depletion.*
- *Fossil fuel use is causing catastrophic pollution.*
- *Fossil fuel use is causing catastrophic climate change.*

Identify the desired action: What will the reader feel compelled to do as a result of the new identification?

- Historically I have been weak on this. *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels* would have been much more influential if I hadn't.

Reframe your fossil fuel conversations and other energy conversations based on the standard of human flourishing.

- *Businesses: Have a conversation with me about how to reframe your internal and external communications.*
- *Citizens: Subscribe to our mailing list to get shareable resources.*

Create your outline: Identify the key changes of context--context additions, context subtractions, or context modifications (including reframing)—necessary to create the overall change in context.

- The theme should be complete sentences/propositions.
- The progression should be purposeful: the propositions should be ordered so that each one has the necessary context preceding it.
- The first proposition should be motivational, giving the reason for evaluating your subject.
- The last proposition should be action-guiding.
- It is very often desirable to have a framing proposition early on. (See "Intellectual Persuasion.")
- To identify the key propositions to add, subtract, or modify, use the "Extreme Clarity" tool.
- More complex arguments require multiple layers: each proposition under the theme should itself be the theme for multiple sub-propositions. How many layers you have should be determined by comfort level:
- Overall the progression of propositions should read as an extremely tight abstract.

Theme: Fossil fuel use is indispensable to the future of human flourishing.

1. *To make the right choices about fossil fuels—which the fate of humanity depends on—we must engage in full-context analysis, with human flourishing as our standard of value. [Chapter 1]*
2. *Human flourishing requires cheap, plentiful, reliable energy, which is both extremely hard to produce (only 3 technologies have ever meaningfully succeeded) and in extremely short supply (3 billion people still lack it). [Chapter 2]*
3. *The fossil fuel industry is the only industry with the ability to produce the variety and quantity of energy required by a world of 7 billion people. [Chapter 2-3]*
4. *Fossil fuels' impact on climate livability is overwhelmingly positive, with the climate protection impact of fossil fuel energy far outweighing the mild warming influence of its CO₂ byproduct. [Chapters 4-5]*
5. *Fossil fuels' impact on environmental quality is overwhelmingly positive, with the environmental improvement impact of fossil fuel energy far outweighing the declining pollution impact. [Chapters 6-7]*
6. *Fossil fuels' impact on resource availability is overwhelmingly positive, with the fossil fuel industry creating new fossil fuel resources as well as the wealth necessary to develop other energy resources. [Chapter 8]*
7. *Therefore, if human flourishing is our standard, fossil fuel use needs to be liberated, not restricted. Action: Reframe your energy conversations based on the standard of human flourishing. [Chapter 9.]*

[Example of layered outline in the appendix.]

When you write, use the outline to direct you what to explain--not to copy directly. Most of the time you should not be looking at your outline but at your audience in your mind's eye as you explain the point to them.

- Understand the interaction between the conscious and subconscious mind.
 - Outlining is primarily a conscious process.
 - Writing is primarily a subconscious process.
 - Editing is primarily a conscious process.
- Write at a speed that is comfortable to you to flow at. For me I write the next sentence when I'm clear enough to speak the point with decent clarity.
 - I used to be too fast and would create messes to clean up.

When you edit, continually look at the outline and where necessary modify it.

- One effective device is "reverse outlining." Make an outline of the piece you wrote (not necessarily the same as the piece you planned to write) and then edit that.

Remember: It is far better to suffer at the outlining level, where you can actually solve all your piece's problems, then at the sentence-by-sentence levels, where you can't.

Appendix: Key Messages on Energy Policy and Fossil Fuels

By: Alex Epstein, author, *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels*

This was an outline I prepared for several presentations I gave to government officials. The purpose of including it is to illustrate how to do a layered outline, with each layer having a purposeful progression of propositions.

Note: At the highest level of this outline I use topic statements, not propositions. This was only because this was prepared for someone else to read--and topic statements can function much like chapter titles. However, I do not recommend using topic statements in your writing outlines.

1. The life-and-death importance of making the right energy choices

- Energy policy has a fundamental impact on human flourishing: health, prosperity, happiness.
 - Energy is the technology that powers every other technology.
 - Abundant food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and education all require abundant energy.
 - 7.5 billion people need energy that is as abundant, affordable, reliable, and safe as possible.
 - 3 billion people have virtually no energy, which means the world needs vastly more energy.
 - 1.1 billion have no electricity whatsoever.
 - 2.7 billion still heat their homes or cook their food with wood or animal dung.
 - It is very difficult to develop technologies that produce abundant energy.
 - in the history of humanity many technologies have promised results but only three technologies have produced enough for even 100 million people: fossil fuel energy, nuclear energy, and hydroelectric energy.
 - The energy choices of the United States of America will impact the quality of life of all our citizens and billions around the world.
 - If we increase access to energy we can improve our standard of living and spread it to billions more.
 - If we decrease access to energy, billions of people's lives will get worse.

2. The right framework for thinking and talking about our energy choices

- To make the right choices we need the right decision-making framework.
 - Every thought process and discussion has a framework—a starting structure, usually invisible, the determines how facts are processed.

- Full context: We have a moral responsibility to carefully weigh the pros and cons of every energy technology and policy.
 - Goal 1: Making the right choice requires being even handed: looking at both pros and cons. *Analogy: If we're making a vaccination decision we need to look at both benefits and side effects.*
 - Problem 1: Most energy conversations, including by very smart people, are extremely biased against fossil fuels, nuclear power, and hydroelectric power.
 - Example: When we talk about fossil fuels and nuclear we only talk about negatives and when we talk about solar and wind we only talk about positives.
 - Example: We condemn coal for having dangerous mining practices but ignore the far more dangerous mining practices involved in producing solar power, wind power, and electric car batteries.
 - This is like making a decision about vaccinating a child by only looking at the benefits or only looking at the side-effects—you can't make the right decision.
 - We are so self-righteous about our bias against fossil fuels that we insult anyone who suggests their positives outweigh their negatives, calling them "climate change deniers" when they are in fact "climate thinkers."
 - Calling a supporter of fossil fuels who believes that the benefits of fossil fuels outweigh their warming impact a "climate change denier" is like calling a supporter of vaccines a "vaccine side-effect denier."
 - Goal 2: Part of being even-handed is precision: we not only look at both benefits and costs, we need to look at their precise magnitudes. *Analogy: If we're making a vaccination decision we need to know the magnitude of the benefits and the magnitude of the side effects.*
 - Are the benefits life-saving or minimal?
 - Are the side-effects a rash or full-blown autism?
 - Problem: Most energy conversations are extremely sloppy about the magnitudes of fossil fuels' risks, often exaggerating them.
 - Example: We are told that CO2 warming is established—"97% of climate scientists agree that climate change is real"—but not how significant the established warming is. We're just supposed to assume it's huge.
 - Example: We are told it's established that CO2 levels are rising, but not how fast—is it 2 feet in 100 years like the UN says or 20 feet in a few decades like Al Gore says? We're just supposed to assume it's huge.
 - Solution: We need to reject bias and sloppiness and instead make full-context analysis part of our framework, looking carefully at the pros and cons of every alternative.
 - Thus, when we consider fossil fuels, we should not write them off as bad because they cause some man-made CO2 and some man-made warming.

- We should look carefully at the full context of their potential impacts on human flourishing now and in the future.
 - Pro-human: Our goal should be to make the energy choices that most positively impact human beings, not that least impact the rest of nature.
 - Making the right choice requires clarity about our standard of right and wrong.
 - Problem: Most energy conversations prioritize unchanged nature over human life.
 - Example: There is almost no public sympathy for the 3 billion human beings with little to no access to energy, but there is enormous public sympathy to any disruption to the lives of polar bears.
 - Example: Opponents of fossil fuels claim to be concerned about CO₂, but oppose the two most affordable and reliable sources of non-carbon energy: hydroelectric power and nuclear power, because they change nature "too much."
 - Example: Instead of pursuing "superior energy" just like we pursue superior computers and superior medicine, we pursue "green" or "renewable" energy that excludes the only three sources of energy that can produce abundant energy.
 - Our standard of right and wrong should not be minimizing human impact but maximizing human flourishing now and in the future.
 - Human flourishing includes a good environment, which is not the same thing as an unchanged environment.
 - Nature does not give us the standard of living we need: we need to transform it.
 - There is nothing inherently wrong with impacting—changing—climate. We enhance our lives by changing our indoor climate all the time, and we should strive to change our outdoor climate in ways such as neutralizing deadly storms. We just want to make sure that any change we make is a new positive for human flourishing.
 - We should not have a "green" or "renewable" energy policy, we should have a "superior" or "pro-human" energy policy.
- Once we are clear on our framework, then we can find and process the full context of facts about fossil fuels' impact on human flourishing.

3. The full context of facts about fossil fuels' impact on human flourishing

- Exploring the potential benefits of fossil fuel use
 - The fossil fuel industry is the only industry that can produce affordable, reliable, scalable energy for billions of people.
 - The fossil fuel industry produces over 80% of the world's power because it is the only industry that has figured out how to produce cheap,

plentiful, reliable energy for electricity, transportation, and heating on a scale of billions.

- Since the energy industry is the industry that powers every other industry, the fossil fuel industry increases productivity and prosperity in every area of life, from agriculture (diesel-powered farm equipment) to hospitals (24/7 electricity).
 - The only industries that can meaningfully supplement fossil fuel energy are the nuclear and hydroelectric industries, which are widely opposed by environmentalists.
 - Even without this opposition fossil fuels would still be irreplaceable for decades to come.
 - Hydro is limited by lack of suitable locations.
 - Nuclear has the long-term potential to expand greatly, but is many decades away from scaling to the level of billions.
 - The solar and wind industries should be free to try to develop and compete, but it must be recognized that they are currently unreliable forms of energy that have added great expense to every grid they have been used on.
 - For these reasons, any restriction on fossil fuel use would do devastating damage. This must be factored into all policy debates over restricting fossil fuels to reduce CO₂ or other byproducts.
- The number one environmental concern, climate impacts, is far different in nature when we look at the full context from a pro-human perspective.
 - To assess the climate-related impacts of fossil fuel use, we have to carefully assess the consequences to human flourishing of 1) the warming impact of CO₂, 2) the fertilizing effect of CO₂, 3) the protecting effect of affordable energy for all climate danger.
 - The warming impact of CO₂ is mild and quite possibly positive—in no way does it justify restricting fossil fuel use whatsoever.
 - It is a proven but little-known fact that the greenhouse effect of CO₂ is a diminishing, logarithmic effect; each molecule of CO₂ warms less than the last.
 - The belief that increases in CO₂ will cause runaway warming is based on speculative climate dynamics represented in models that have utterly failed to predict climate.
 - Global average temperatures and CO₂ levels are near all-time lows from a geological perspective; today's CO₂ levels are an estimated 1/20th their all time high (a highly fertile period).
 - Warming is almost universally desired among civilizations, with cold-related deaths dramatically greater than heat-related deaths. In general, life thrives under warmer conditions.

- The widely-ignored fertilizing effect of CO₂ is significant and positive, yet ignored; a proper energy and environmental discussion must take it into account.
 - Increasing CO₂ levels is a proven driver of plant growth, which is why greenhouses contain 3 times as much CO₂ as our atmosphere.
 - Satellite data show dramatic increases in plant growth in uninhabited locations as CO₂ levels have increased over the past several decades.
 - Increased CO₂ has also contributed significantly to crop yields and helped millions avoid malnutrition or starvation.
- The widely-ignored protecting effect of fossil fuels is spectacularly positive; it has helped us take the inherently dangerous climate and make it far safer than it has ever been.
 - While the climate debate treats the global climate system as naturally stable and safe, it is in fact naturally volatile and vicious. Climate safety requires climate protection through development and technology—both of which are fueled by affordable energy.
 - The international disaster database, which tracks climate-related deaths—including deaths from flood, droughts, extreme heat, extreme cold, storms, and wildfires—shows a 98% decrease in the rate of climate-related deaths since significant CO₂ emissions began 80 years ago.
 - Fossil fuel use doesn't take a safe climate and make it dangerous, it takes a dangerous climate and makes it safe.

4. The pro-human policy toward fossil fuels

- Freeing fossil fuel use instead of restricting it means billions of people will have access to energy who otherwise wouldn't.
- Freeing fossil fuel use instead of restricting it is compatible with a safe climate, a clean environment, and continuous progress.
- We should be free to produce and use whatever forms of energy we judge best, so long as we follow laws against pollution and endangerment.

5. Messaging that reframes the conversation instead of reacting to the conversation

- Arguing to 0: Most supporters of fossil fuels are ineffective because they accept the biased, sloppy, anti-human framework of fossil fuel opponents—then reactively try to contradict individual facts.

- Arguing to 100: I have had enormous success persuading others by reframing the conversation in pro-human, full-context terms and then presenting the facts.
- Arguing to 100 can be done in any form, from 1-on-1 conversation to tweets.
- My company, the Center for Industrial Progress, is a for-profit think-tank that creates custom (white-label) pro-human messaging for clients.
- We have a policy of assisting the government free of charge and would be honored to help you support pro-human, pro-freedom energy policies.
 - Email alex@industrialprogress.net or text me: 949-421-8867.