As a salute to the proverbial high school English teacher, the importance of developing an outline prior to writing will be discussed in this chapter. In high school, most writers probably had to turn in an outline of a particular theme a week or so before the full paper was due. The teacher had valid reasons to require an outline. First of all, it required an organization of thoughts about the paper a week before it was due—no more last-minute procrastination. An outline also made the writer think through (minimally at least) the topic and organize his or her ideas. The outline also helped guide the writing and helped keep the writer on topic in order to prevent writing too much material that was ultimately deleted. So an outline was not just one more homework assignment, but it actually helped writers write better themes in high school English class and would also help when writing scientific manuscripts or creative works in the future.

Do I Really Need an Outline?

Many writers ask this question and the answer is the same whether they are a novice, seasoned writer, or somewhere in the middle. The answer is always YES, but the implementation of the outline may be different as more experience is gained as a writer. Readers of this textbook could be assumed to be novice or moderately experienced but still recognize a need for help with their writing. In this phase, a solid outline is a must before beginning to write sections of the manuscript, and it will pay off immensely at many other stages of writing.

First, writers should think of an outline as the skeleton of the overall scientific manuscript. It is the bones that holds everything together and allows for movement to the different parts. The outline should be brief but include all the parts of the paper—the topic, section headings, major sub-sections, and critical evidence to be presented. The outline moves from one part of the paper to the next in an organized manner so ideas are presented clearly to the reader. Since every section of the manuscript is represented in the outline, developing an outline requires writers to think through every section prior to writing the actual manuscript draft.