



OU Writing Center
The University of Oklahoma

A Guide to Outlining

What is an Outline?

An outline is a tool used to organize and map out the points of an essay. A writer can use an outline to visualize their ideas during the planning stage of their writing process. An outline breaks down the essay into topics and subtopics using numbers and/or bullets to arrange the essay logically to convey points or claims.

What is the Purpose of an Outline?

An outline provides writers with a solid foundation as they embark on their writing journeys, initiating the writing process. Outlines help writers lay the groundwork for their papers and help them connect their topics and subtopics to support their thesis statement, purpose, or argument.

**Before starting an outline, it is important to have an initial thesis statement, clear purpose, or firm argument. Your thesis statement, specific purpose, or argument will summarize your paper's key points or claims.*

Key Elements of an Essay/Outline

As you draft an outline, it is vital to keep in mind the key elements of an essay. An outline will typically follow this format. Essential parts of an essay include:

Introduction:

Includes the essay's main topic and thesis statement. The thesis statement will present the essay's claim or argument.

Body Paragraphs:

Serves as the main part of the essay. Body paragraphs provide supporting evidence, including facts, data, and examples, to support the thesis statement. Generally, an essay will have at least three body paragraphs. The total number of body paragraphs depends on the overall length of the essay.

Conclusion:

Brings together the main points of the essay. This is an opportunity to restate the thesis statement and summarize the main points of the essay.

Steps for Creating an Outline:

Define the Purpose of Your Paper

Why are you writing this paper? What is this essay supposed to “do”? It is important to know what type of essay you’re writing and understand its specific elements. There are four main types of essays: narrative, expository, persuasive, and descriptive, each with distinct objectives, tones, and intentions. So, as you begin outlining your essay, it is essential that you clearly define and understand your writing goals.

Identify Your Key Points

Once you establish your paper’s purpose, which is typically the development of a thesis statement, you must locate key main points to support your specific purpose or stance. You should aim for at least three main points, although the total number of main points will vary depending on the overall length of the essay. List each main point using Roman Numerals (I, II, III) in your outline.

Incorporate Supporting Details

Now that you have identified your main points, add details to support these ideas. These details or subtopics are often facts, examples, and/or data that work as pieces of evidence to support your overall main claim. These points strengthen and validate each main point. It is good to have at least two supporting details for each main point. Once you identify each detail, list them below each corresponding point using lower case letters (a, b, c) in your outline.

Conclusion

Begin by restating your thesis statement or your paper’s major claim, followed by a summary of the main points of your essay. The conclusion can be one paragraph to multiple pages long, depending on the overall length of your essay.

**By following the steps above, here's how your outline will look:*

I.	Introduction
	a. Introduce a specific point, stance, or topic
	b. State your thesis statement
II.	First Body Paragraph
	a. Start with a topic sentence that supports your thesis statement
	b. Provide facts, data, and examples to support your stance or argument
	c. Connect the supporting elements back to your thesis statement
III.	Second Body Paragraph
	a. Start with a topic sentence that supports your thesis statement
	b. Provide facts, data, and examples to support your stance or argument
	c. Connect the supporting elements back to your thesis statement
IV.	Third Body Paragraph
	a. Start with a topic sentence that supports your thesis statement
	b. Provide facts, data, and examples to support your stance or argument
	c. Connect the supporting elements back to your thesis statement
V.	Conclusion
	a. Summarize the main points of your essay or paper
	b. Restate your thesis statement



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