

Basic Essay Structure

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers outlining and building the structure of an essay by identifying the components of an essay and putting them together in a successful outline. The specific areas of focus include:

1. Purpose of Outlining
2. Outlining Major Essay Components
 - 2a. Thesis Statement
 - 2b. Body Paragraphs
3. How an Outline Becomes an Essay

1. Purpose of Outlining

An outline is like a paper's blueprint, and generating that outline might be one of the steps you take during the prewriting stage.

An outline will likely have:

- An introduction
- A thesis statement
- Brief summaries of each body paragraph
- A conclusion

I. Introduction: Are zero-tolerance policies harmful or beneficial for schools?

(a) Thesis: Zero-tolerance policies cause more harm than good in schools.

II. Body Paragraph 1: What are zero-tolerance policies and how have they been used in schools?

III. Body Paragraph 2: Why do some advocate for them?

IV. Body Paragraph 3: What are the arguments against them?

V. Conclusion: Because of the arguments against zero tolerance, schools should avoid instituting such policies.

As you can see, this outline starts with the introduction, which brings the reader into this topic and tells what the main debate is. Next, there is a **thesis statement**, which is a clear explanation of the main point of this essay. Then, there are three body paragraphs, each of which is going to discuss a different idea that supports the overall main point.

Finally, there is the **conclusion**, which is the last paragraph or paragraphs of an essay. That conclusion should go beyond merely summarizing what the main point has already said. With an outline such as this, you just have to fill in the details to be able to build this idea into a successful essay.

At first, it might seem like writing this outline is a waste of time since you're going to have to fill it in with greater detail when you actually write the essay. But in fact, an outline will save you time and make your writing more successful.

Creating order out of all of the mess of your thoughts will help you write a more organized essay when you actually start the writing. If you plot that organization out in brief, you might catch a gap in your argument or a spot where your ideas don't entirely make sense yet, and you can fill those in before you write.

Just as importantly, you might be able to see a piece of information that isn't directly related to the thesis statement, thus keeping the overall focus of your essay narrow and avoiding wasted time writing a paragraph that will just need to be cut out later.



TERMS TO KNOW

Thesis Statement

A single sentence that expresses the controlling idea for a piece of writing.

Conclusion

The last thing in a piece of writing; the last paragraph or paragraphs of an essay.

2. Outlining Major Essay Components

Because an outline is put together in this logical progression from intro through body paragraphs to conclusion, it will set the stage for you to keep up that logical flow of ideas.

Now you can start to explore a few of the elements of the outline a little more thoroughly.

2a. Thesis Statement

A thesis statement is a single sentence that expresses the controlling idea for a piece of writing. That controlling idea is the main idea of the paper, the goal that will organize the structure and content of the piece.

In an essay, the thesis usually appears in the first two paragraphs, introducing the main idea to the readers right up front. In shorter pieces, it's almost always in the very first paragraph.

Regardless of how long the paper is, a thesis is just one narrow idea that sets it apart from the broader topic, which can itself encompass many possible thesis statements.

As you write the paper, it's very possible that the thesis statement will change to reflect the statements and support you're making in the essay. This is a wonderful point of revision—to discover as you're writing that perhaps you're going in a slightly different direction than the thesis indicated.

But the thesis can also help rein you in and maintain focus in your writing. Thus, it's important to have a solid working thesis before you begin writing, even if you acknowledge that it might change by the end. That way, you can focus your whole writing process from start to finish around the goal indicated in your thesis.

2b. Body Paragraphs

Once you have your thesis statement and are ready to come up with supporting paragraphs, you can start to fill in the body of the essay.

Body paragraphs are where you give the thesis statement the support it needs through:

- Examples
- Illustrations
- Evidence
- Explanations
- Descriptions

This kind of support comes in separate paragraphs between the introduction and the conclusion. Thus, as you're writing your outline and briefly summarizing the supporting ideas, you should think about how you will develop those points in the body paragraphs.

Each paragraph should have a **topic sentence**, which is a sentence that expresses the main idea of a paragraph and which comes at the beginning of the paragraph. This will limit and focus the paragraph just like a thesis statement limits and focuses the whole paper.

Then, you'll have supporting statements, which can include evidence, reasoning, and rhetorical appeals, in order to prove to your reader that the main point of the paragraph is valid. You'll want to carefully choose the support and the way you express it in order to match the audience you intend and the main purpose or goal of the text.

In this way, supporting statements provide support for the main idea of the paragraph, just as each body paragraph provides support for the overall thesis. Thus, writing a paragraph mirrors writing the whole paper; if you can do one, you can do the other.

Between each paragraph, just as between each sentence, you want to make use of **transitions** to direct and clarify. Transitions are words, word combinations, and even sentences that highlight connections between ideas.

These are great tools for helping your reader understand what you're saying and see how the different parts of your essay all relate to the same whole idea. By using transitions, you can control how your writing flows from one idea to the next, greatly influencing your readers.

Looking at the following two paragraphs, you can see that without a clear transition, you as a reader are left to decide for yourself what you think the connection is:

Some proponents of zero-tolerance policies argue that such policies are essential for protecting the safety of students. As they explain it, the reason why someone breaks a law isn't important because the law was put in place for a reason. So even if a student breaks, say, a rule against drugs on campus by accidentally bringing over-the-counter pain relievers in a backpack, the prohibition against drugs is so important that the student would have to be punished.

Those against zero tolerance point out that there are many shades of gray when a rule is broken. Adhering to the letter of the law without taking into account context creates a hostile environment, they argue. For example, a student accidentally bringing ibuprofen poses little to no threat to peers, and therefore should not be treated as if the student were exposing the school to the drug trade.

But if the writer adds in a transition, you know exactly what the relationship between the two paragraphs is:

Some proponents of zero-tolerance policies argue that such policies are essential for protecting the safety of students. As they explain it, the reason why someone breaks a law isn't important because the law was put in place for a reason. So even if a student breaks, say, a rule against drugs on campus by accidentally bringing over-the-counter pain relievers in a backpack, the prohibition against drugs is so important that the student would have to be punished.

In contrast, those against zero tolerance point out that there are many shades of gray when a rule is broken. Adhering to the letter of the law without taking into account context creates a hostile environment, they argue. For example, a student accidentally bringing ibuprofen poses little to no threat to peers, and therefore should not be treated as if the student were exposing the school to the drug trade.

Though many readers would have figured out that these two paragraphs contrast, adding in that transition prevents any potential confusion for the reader and assures the author that the readers will follow along with the overall intent of the paragraph and the direction in which the argument is taking that paragraph.



TERMS TO KNOW

Topic Sentence

A sentence that expresses the main idea of a paragraph.

Transition

Words, word combinations, and even sentences that highlight connections between ideas.

3. How an Outline Becomes an Essay

Now that you understand how to outline the major components of an essay, you can start to think about how that outline will come together and ultimately form the foundation of a successful essay.



TRY IT

Read the following short essay, and see if you can identify each of the components (introduction, thesis statement, and body paragraphs with transitions and topic sentences) that the writer outlined beforehand.

Are zero-tolerance policies good for schools? Once we understand the effects, it's clear that zero-tolerance policies do more harm than good in schools.

Zero tolerance is a way to describe policies that impose automatic penalties for breaking rules. These have been used in many schools to curb drugs, violence, and inappropriate conduct.

Some proponents of zero tolerance argue that such policies are essential for protecting the safety of students. As they explain it, the reason why someone breaks a law isn't important. Even if a student breaks a rule against drugs on campus by accidentally bringing Advil, the rule against drugs is so important that the student would have to be punished.

In contrast, those against zero tolerance point out that law without context creates a hostile environment. A student accidentally bringing Advil poses no threat to peers and should now be treated the same as other drug violations. Imposing penalties on this student could have significant negative effects.

As we can see, such policies fail to acknowledge the reasons that rules get broken. Thus they cause, not prevent, harm. Because of the arguments against zero tolerance, schools should avoid instituting such policies.

Here is the introduction, with the thesis statement underlined at the end:

Are zero-tolerance policies good for schools? Once we understand the effects, it's clear that zero-tolerance policies do more harm than good in schools.

Now notice that the main point of each paragraph, found in each topic sentence, supports that thesis statement precisely:

Are zero-tolerance policies good for schools? Once we understand the effects, it's clear that zero-tolerance policies do more harm than good in schools.

Zero tolerance is a way to describe policies that impose automatic penalties for breaking rules. These

have been used in many schools to curb drugs, violence, and inappropriate conduct.

Some proponents of zero tolerance argue that such policies are essential for protecting the safety of students. As they explain it, the reason why someone breaks a law isn't important. Even if a student breaks a rule against drugs on campus by accidentally bringing Advil, the rule against drugs is so important that the student would have to be punished.

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As we can see, such policies fail to acknowledge the reasons that rules get broken. Thus they cause, not prevent, harm. Because of the arguments against zero tolerance, schools should avoid instituting such policies.

Those body paragraphs then each develop support for one element of the thesis. This one, for instance, is specifically designed to point the reader towards the potential harm of these policies:

In contrast, those against zero tolerance point out that law without context creates a hostile environment. A student accidentally bringing Advil poses no threat to peers and should now be treated the same as other drug violations. Imposing penalties on this student could have significant negative effects.

Also notice that there are transitions, which help the reader prepare for the paragraph to come:

Are zero-tolerance policies good for schools? Once we understand the effects, it's clear that zero-tolerance policies do more harm than good in schools.

Zero tolerance is a way to describe policies that impose automatic penalties for breaking rules. These have been used in many schools to curb drugs, violence, and inappropriate conduct.

Some proponents of zero tolerance argue that such policies are essential for protecting the safety of students. As they explain it, the reason why someone breaks a law isn't important. Even if a student breaks a rule against drugs on campus by accidentally bringing Advil, the rule against drugs is so important that the student would have to be punished.

In contrast, those against zero tolerance point out that law without context creates a hostile environment. A student accidentally bringing Advil poses no threat to peers and should now be treated the same as other drug violations. Imposing penalties on this student could have significant negative effects.

As we can see, such policies fail to acknowledge the reasons that rules get broken, Thus they cause, not prevent, harm. Because of the arguments against zero tolerance, schools should avoid instituting such policies.

Overall, this is a pretty successful brief essay.



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned that an outline is like a blueprint for your paper that you create during the prewriting stage. The **purpose of outlining** is to organize your thoughts before writing so that you can more easily spot any problem areas in your argument or ideas.

You also learned how to **outline major essay components**, such as the **thesis statement** and **body paragraphs** in order to ensure that they adequately reflect each other in the paper.

Finally, you saw **how an outline becomes an essay** when the writer fills in the specifics of each section.

Good luck!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Conclusion

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A single sentence that expresses the controlling idea for a piece of writing.

Topic Sentence

A sentence that expresses the main idea of a paragraph.

Transition

Words, word combinations, and even sentences that highlight connections between ideas.