

Outlining an Essay

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn more about how an outline will help you plan your essay draft, and how outlines are typically organized and filled in with ideas. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Purpose of Outlining
2. Outline Structure
3. Preventing Plagiarism

1. Purpose of Outlining

When you write, you need to organize your ideas in an order that makes sense, and an **outline** can help you do that.

Especially for a longer essay, an outline will help you determine the order of your paragraphs, ensuring that your purpose stands out clearly and all parts of the paper work together to consistently develop and support your main point.

Order refers to your choice of what to present first, second, third, etc. in your writing. The order you pick closely relates to your purpose for writing that particular assignment.

➞ **EXAMPLE** When telling a story, it is usually important to first describe the background for the action. When writing an argumentative research essay, you will want to follow that background by organizing your support to convince readers that your point of view on an issue is well-reasoned and worthy of belief.

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 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 thinking 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 catch 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.



TERM TO KNOW

Outline

The prewritten plan for an essay or other piece of writing that generally includes a working thesis, the primary ideas to be discussed, and the planned structural organization.

2. Outline Structure

There are two types of formal outlines:

- Topic outlines, which use words and phrases to represent ideas
- Sentence outlines, which use complete sentences to state ideas

You format both types of outlines the same way.



STEP BY STEP

1. Place your introduction and thesis statement at the beginning, under Roman numeral I.
2. Use Roman numerals (II, III, IV, V, etc.) to identify the main ideas that develop the thesis statement.
3. Use capital letters (A, B, C, D, etc.) to divide your main ideas into parts.
4. Use Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc.) if you need to subdivide any As, Bs, or Cs into smaller parts.
5. End with the final Roman numeral expressing your idea for your conclusion.

Here is what the skeleton of a traditional formal outline looks like.

I. Introduction

A. Thesis statement

II. Main idea 1 → *becomes the topic sentence of body paragraph 1*

A. Supporting detail → *becomes a support sentence of body paragraph 1*

1. Sub-point

2. Sub-point

B. Supporting detail

1. Sub-point

2. Sub-point

C. Supporting detail

1. Sub-point

- 2. Sub-point
- III. Main idea 2 → *becomes the topic sentence of body paragraph 2*
 - A. Supporting detail → *becomes a support sentence of body paragraph 2*
 - 1. Sub-point
 - 2. Sub-point
 - B. Supporting detail
 - 1. Sub-point
 - 2. Sub-point
 - C. Supporting detail
 - 1. Sub-point
 - 2. Sub-point
- IV. Main idea 3 → *becomes the topic sentence of body paragraph 3*
 - A. Supporting detail → *becomes a support sentence of body paragraph 3*
 - 1. Sub-point
 - 2. Sub-point
 - B. Supporting detail
 - 1. Sub-point
 - 2. Sub-point
 - C. Supporting detail
 - 1. Sub-point
 - 2. Sub-point
- V. Conclusion

For this course, you will be constructing a topic outline, so complete sentences are not required. Additionally, depending on the length of your assignment, you may not have this exact number of sub-points or supporting details. Pay close attention to your assignment instructions to determine the appropriate length of your outline.

3. Preventing Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a subject that you're likely familiar with, at least vaguely. In an academic context, plagiarism involves presenting someone else's ideas or writing as your own, whether intentionally (on purpose) or unintentionally (accidentally).

Regardless of the intention, this behavior is considered unethical, and sometimes even illegal. Intentional, or deliberate, plagiarism generally incurs some penalty from an instructor or educational institution. Unintentional plagiarism comes about when a careless writer fails to give credit to whoever first came up with the idea or

work that's been taken. It's important to address plagiarism in this discussion because having an original outline and original working thesis will help prevent both types of plagiarism.

If students, or any writers for that matter, have an outline and a working thesis, they will have already clearly expressed and organized their ideas in their own words, and will therefore be less likely to unintentionally take another's ideas or words as their own.

Also, if writers have put in a good amount of effort during the prewriting stage, there will generally be less reason to take another's ideas or words on purpose. After all, they'll have already done half the work, right?



TERM TO KNOW

Plagiarism

The presentation of another person's ideas or writing as your own, either intentionally or unintentionally.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the **purpose of outlining** an essay before drafting. Outlines provide direction and structure for an essay, so writers can benefit from using an outline to move into early and later drafts. Since it is meant to reflect the organization of an essay, a typical **outline structure** consists of the introduction and thesis at the beginning, followed by the main ideas and supporting details in the middle, and then a conclusion at the end.

You also learned how using an outline can help **prevent plagiarism**, both intentional and unintentional. Because outlines encourage writers to put their ideas in their own words early on, plagiarism may be less likely to occur later in the writing process.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Some of this content has been adapted from Lumen Learning's "Outlining" tutorial.



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