



WRITER'S STUDIO RESOURCES: OUTLINING



What is an Outline?

- An outline is a writing tool used to help organize your ideas and plan out your writing.
- An outline is like a map for your essay. You can use it as a guide to keep your writing focused and on track.

Why would I use an outline?

- Outlining can help you plan your paper by giving you a simple, visual representation of the shape of your essay.
- Outlining can help you to see if your organization makes sense and show you where you need to expand.

When would I use an outline?

- Outlines can be used at any stage of the writing process, from prewriting to revision.
- Outlines can be used with other prewriting exercises to guide your research, organize your notes, or to help with revision.

How do I make an outline?

Outlines can be as simple or as complex as you need them to be, but the basic process is always the same.

Step One: Use your thesis statement as a guide

Remember that your paper needs to be organized around a central idea: your thesis. Even if your thesis is a work in progress, place it at the top of your outline to use as a reference and to keep yourself on track.

Step Two: Create categories from your main points

Once you've conducted some research, organize your notes into a few broad categories (often 3-5, depending on the length of your essay). These will serve as the topics for your body paragraphs.

Step Three: Order your categories and check your organization

Once you have the main points for your essay categorized, put them in order to begin shaping your argument. Then, check your organization to see if it makes sense. Often there is a logical flow from one topic to the next.

Note: *Outlining can also be useful for brainstorming before you have a thesis or do any research. Use brainstorming techniques like listing and webbing to generate ideas, then sort them into categories and list questions you have for each category to guide your research.*

**See our Prewriting Guide for more on prewriting techniques!*



Crafting an Outline

Let's take a look at an example outline:

Thesis: Oral storytelling is an important part of everyday culture and its uniqueness will help it survive even in this digital age.

- I. Shifts in storytelling style
 - A. Historical development
 1. Non-verbal
 2. Verbal
 3. Written
 - B. Modern development: Social media platforms
- II. Stories as preservation of history
 - A. Passed down through generations
 - B. Tool to learn cultural/family history
- III. The new generation
 - A. Shift back to oral styles
 - B. Combine oral techniques with digital platforms
 - C. Digital preservation

Create sections from your main topics.

List details for each section.

Organize sections and details to formulate an argument.

Put your working thesis at the top to keep your paper focused.

Details can be written in shorthand for simpler outlines or in full sentences for a more in-depth outline.

Organization can follow different patterns. This one uses a historical pattern, moving from the past into the present/future.

Remember! An outline is a tool to help your writing process, so format it however is most helpful to you.

Once you've created an outline, ask yourself the following:

- **Does each paragraph relate back to your thesis?** If not, either your body paragraphs have strayed off topic, or your thesis is too simple.
- **Is there a logical flow to your argument?** If not, try rearranging your paragraph topics to create a better progression for your argument.
- **Do any paragraphs address more than one topic?** If yes, split up the topics into separate paragraphs. Each paragraph should focus on one main idea.
- **Do multiple paragraphs repeat the same or similar ideas?** If yes, combine these paragraphs and/or cut out repetitive information.
- **Can any of your paragraphs be moved around without changing your argument?** If yes, you need to work on integrating the ideas between your paragraphs. Each paragraph should lead into the next and build upon the argument.
- **Do any paragraphs need to be expanded with more support/evidence/analysis?** If yes, go back and do more research to find additional evidence or include more of your own thoughts and analysis to strengthen the paragraph.