

Campus Academic Resource Program

How to Make and Use an Outline

This handout will:

- Discuss the importance of organization.
- Offer strategies for prewriting.
- Illustrate the outlining process.
- Address how to use an outline in the writing process.

The importance of outlining:

- **Why we outline:** Outlining is a powerful tool for organizing your points and evidence in a way that makes your paper's argument as effective as possible. By organizing your paper before you begin writing, you can determine how to use the order in which you present information to your advantage.

Using your outline:

- **Your outline is a guide:** As you begin to write your paper your outline will serve as a guide for ordering your paper and ensuring that you have included all necessary information. This will help you keep your writing focused and concise, and prevent you from going on tangents or providing information that is irrelevant to your argument.

How to prepare to outline:

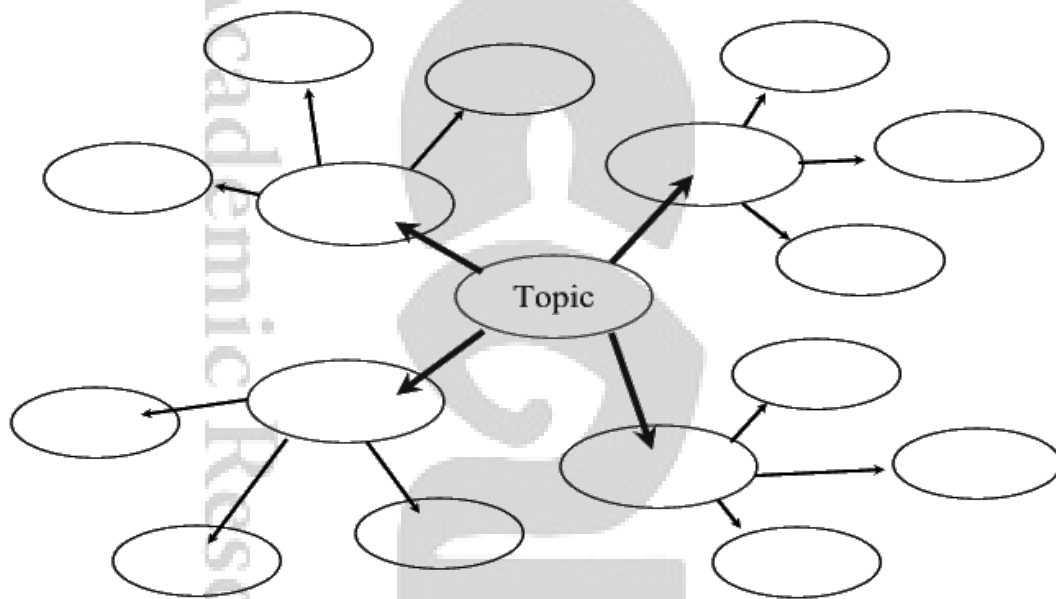
- **Determining the purpose of your paper:** Before you begin your outline you will need to determine the purpose of your paper, and select the key evidence you will use to support your argument (For more information see the Brainstorming and Thesis Statements handouts at www.carp.sfsu.edu).
 - **Understanding the prompt:** To determine the purpose of your paper start by making sure you understand the prompt clearly. It may be helpful to go through the prompt line-by-line and “dissect” it by annotating the prompt itself, or making a list of everything that must be included in your paper in order to meet the prompt's requirements (for more information see the Addressing the Prompt handout at www.carp.sfsu.edu).
 - **Pre-writing:** The other key aspect of determining the purpose of your paper is to understand your own thoughts, feelings, and interests regarding the topic. Some of the following strategies can help you organize your thoughts on your paper's topic to identify possible arguments you could make in your paper.
 - **Make a List:** Listing your ideas evidence, or thoughts on your topic can help you spot patterns and decide in what order you want to present your information so that your paper is clear and concise. Once you begin outlining you can use this list to ensure that all of the points and evidence on your list are included in your outline.
 - **Talk Through It:** If you process ideas better verbally it can be helpful to talk through your ideas before or while you map them visually. If you have a friend who is willing to help, tell them about your thoughts and feelings in response to the evidence you have found or the prompt you have been given (a tutor could also fill this role). This can be very helpful because they might ask questions which will force you to more closely examine potential holes in your argument, or allow you to look at the topic

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from a different point of view. This can help you in the outlining process because it gives you a better understanding of how to order the information so that your arguments are as clear as possible. Keep in mind that you may still want visual representations of your ideas to refer to.

- ▶ *Clustering:* Another way to organize your thoughts visually is by “clustering.” Clustering creates a chart or map (like the one below) that groups similar ideas together and shows how they connect to the main ideas of your topic. Once you have put all of your thoughts into clusters you can translate your cluster into an outline by recognizing the large bubbles with the most secondary bubbles and using these as your main points.



- ▶ *Free-Write:* Free-writing can also be a helpful way to put your thoughts into words and take note of what comes to your mind when you think about your paper topic. Start by summarizing your topic and then write for a set amount of time—usually five or ten minutes is sufficient. After you have done your initial free-write, read through what you have written and take note of what ideas stick out to you as the most interesting and compelling. Set the timer for another five or ten minutes and write again, but this time only about these ideas. You can continue to do this until you feel like you are writing specifically on the topic you would like to address in your paper. This will help you to determine the purpose of your paper and allow you to see patterns that could become the main points of your outline and paper.

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Grouping evidence logically. Once you have determined the topic and purpose of your paper, it can be challenging to order your thoughts and arguments in logical way. The following example will walk you through how to list your information in a logical way. This can help you to determine your main points and refine your argument and thesis.

○ *Step 1: Form a Working Thesis:* Your working thesis is a general idea of the argument you will make in your paper. The purpose of a working thesis is to allow you to gather evidence and determine supporting points which you can later use to refine your thesis and write your paper. For the sake of this example, say your working thesis is: **“The Harry Potter series has had a positive impact on the generation that was raised reading it.”**

○ *Step 2: Make a list.* As you brainstorm, create a list of your evidence. For our working thesis example, a brainstorm list might look like this:

Harry Potter conventions
Fan-fiction
Forums
Fun and exciting to read
Themed Parties

Portrayal of friendship in Harry Potter
Tolerance Metaphor
Power of words to create worlds
Shows characters fighting for causes

○ *Step 3: Categorizing.* The ideas in this list can be organized into three main points that can be used to support our working thesis. These main points are:

- ★ **Harry Potter is a cultural phenomenon which has created a sense of community among its readers.**
- ★ **The themes in Harry Potter promote important values such as tolerance, self-sacrifice, and bravery.**
- ★ **Harry Potter motivated children to read and inspired them to write.**

Directions: In the grid below, sort the examples from our brainstorming list so that each one fits under one of these three main points.

Harry Potter is a cultural phenomenon which has created a sense of community among its readers.			
The themes in Harry Potter promote important values such as tolerance, self-sacrifice, and bravery.			
Harry Potter motivated children to read and inspired them to write.			

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How to outline your paper:

- Write a template: Now that you have determined the purpose of your paper and begun to organize your ideas and evidence in a way that makes sense to you, it is time to think about how you will structure that information within the context of a paper. Start by making an outline template similar to the example below:

<p>ESSAY OUTLINE</p> <p>I. Introduction (Write a thesis statement)</p> <p>II. Topic Sentence 1:</p> <p> A. Support</p> <p> 1. Detail/example</p> <p> 2. Detail/example</p> <p> B. Support</p> <p> 1. Detail/example</p> <p> 2. Detail/example</p> <p>III. Topic Sentence 2:</p> <p> A. Support</p> <p> 1. Detail/example</p> <p> 3. Detail/example</p> <p> B. Support</p> <p> 1. Detail/example</p> <p> 2. Detail/example</p> <p>IV. Topic Sentence 3:</p> <p> A. Support</p> <p> 1. Detail/example</p> <p> 2. Detail/example</p> <p> B. Support</p> <p> 2. Detail/example</p> <p> 3. Detail/example</p> <p>V. Concluding Paragraph</p>

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- Key components of a standard academic paper: Basic academic papers can be divided into three sections: the introduction, the body paragraphs, and the conclusion. Each of these sections performs an important role in communicating and defending your thesis.

○ **Introduction:** The purpose of this paragraph is to tell your audience what to expect from your paper. This means introducing the topic, presenting your thesis, and to briefly state what points you will make in your argument. Your introduction will also set the tone for the rest of your paper, is it a literary analysis, a research paper, a persuasive essay, a lab report, etc? Your introduction should make the answer clear to your audience (for more information see the Introduction Paragraphs handout at www.carp.sfsu.edu).

○ **Body:** Your body paragraphs will contain the evidence, arguments, and points that support your thesis. Remember, your paper can have as few or as many main points as are necessary to make your argument and to meet the assignment criteria. Each paragraph in the body should have a topic sentence that communicates what that paragraph will be about. Additionally, each topic sentence should show how the paragraph supports your thesis. It is up to you to decide in what order your body paragraphs should appear in order to best support your thesis (for more information see the Topic Sentences handout at www.carp.sfsu.edu).

○ **Conclusion:** Your conclusion should restate your thesis and briefly summarize your argument's main points in order to reaffirm the importance of your paper's argument. It is sometimes appropriate to use your conclusion to present possible extensions of your argument or to suggest further research in a specific direction. This illustrates a knowledge of the implications of your argument beyond what you have discussed in the paper, and an understanding of possible nuances that you believe could be interesting and valuable. However, your conclusion should primarily serve to provide your reader with a sense of closure about how you have proved your thesis in the body of your paper (for more information see the Conclusions handout at www.carp.sfsu.edu).

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Activity 2: Filling in the outline

- Using the information presented above and the organization exercise earlier in this handout, write an outline for our Harry Potter essay below.
 - *Step 1: fill out the outline template below.* Consider how you might begin and end your essay, and how you will order your main points and evidence to make your argument as clear as possible.

I. Intro:

1. **Thesis:** The Harry Potter series had a positive impact on the generation that was raised reading it.

II. Main point 1:

1. Evidence/example:
2. Evidence/example:
3. Evidence/example:

III. Main point 2:

1. Evidence/example:
2. Evidence/example:
3. Evidence/example:

IV. Main point 3:

1. Evidence/example:
2. Evidence/example:
3. Evidence/example:

V. Conclusion

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Finishing your Outline:

- Revise where revision is needed. Once you have finished your rough outline, determine whether your working thesis needs to be revised to be more specific or to more accurately represent your argument based on the evidence you provide.
- Incorporate your sources. Identify the sources that have informed your thesis and, on your outline, note where you will use these sources in your paper. Which of the main points does each source support? How will you utilize quotes and paraphrasing? Remember, using sources as evidence in your argument is completely acceptable and even recommended. Write down quotes of page numbers that you will be using as evidence so that they are readily available when you are writing your paper.
- Write the paper. Once you feel that your outline accurately reflects the argument you want to make and illustrates how you intend to use your evidence, it is time to start writing! Remember that your outline is meant to help you write, if you find that it is preventing you from making your argument effectively, this means your outline needs to be revised.

Outlining Different Types of Papers

• Different structures for different purposes: Different disciplines require different types of papers. Although the conventions and organization of these papers may differ from the examples in this handout, the outlining process is similar. In any paper you will need to determine how to divide sections of similar information, how to support any arguments or analysis, and how to ensure that your paper has a coherent and cohesive focus throughout. Below are examples of how different types of papers might be outlined. (Note that these are generalized examples; it is always good to look up papers in your discipline to see what the specific conventions are.)

Compare/Contrast Essay
Introduction
Thing 1
Thing 2
Analysis
Conclusion

Lab Report
Purpose
Procedure
Data
Analysis
Conclusion

Literature Review
Overview of subject
Division of works into categories
Explanation of works' similarities/differences
Conclusions about authors' arguments etc.

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Tips for Outlining

- Revise as needed. Revision is a huge part of writing. If your outline is not communicating what you want say, revise until you are happy with it. Utilizing brainstorming and prewriting strategies can help you think about the framing of your ideas in your outline in new ways until you find a framework that fits your topic and argument.
- What to do if you get stuck outlining. If you get stuck outlining (or anywhere in the writing process) a good solution is always to meet with a tutor! A tutor will be able to see what you have written with fresh eyes and ask questions that can help you to consider new approaches or aspects of your topic.
- How many main points do you need? Although the examples in this handout were all outlines with three main points, your outline can have as many main points as necessary to communicate your argument and to meet the assignment's criteria. However, be sure to cultivate each of your main points fully so that your body paragraph are not too short or underdeveloped.
- How specific should an outline be? The amount of detail that you put into an outline is up to you, but keep in mind that the purpose of an outline is to help you write a paper. If the amount of detail you put into your outline detracts from its usefulness or limits your ability to adapt to the needs of your paper, then it may need to be revised. That being said, your outline should contain your thesis, main ideas, and supporting evidence.
- Look at similar papers. If you are unsure about the structural conventions for the style of paper you are writing, it can be helpful to look up papers within the same discipline (i.e. biology lab reports, historical research papers, psychology literature reviews, etc.). If you are still confused, visit your professor's office hours and ask questions about the specific assignment or recommendations for formatting and style resources.

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Works Cited

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