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How to Outline an Essay

Before and after you write a draft of your essay, you should try to write an outline.

In an outline, you trace your paper's argument. Outlines can help you *map* your argument, and *visualize* what you want to say.

You don't need to stick to your outline as you write your paper. An outline is just another tool to improve your paper. After you make an outline, you should be prepared to reorganize your paper and your argument as you identify inconsistencies in your organization.

The two main types of outlines are informal, "scratch," outlines and formal outlines. Informal outlines are most useful *before* you write a draft of your paper. Formal outlines are useful once you've written a draft.

In an informal, "scratch" outline, you should try to give a rough sense of your overall argument, drawing a sketch of what you want to say. Your informal outline should still include an attempt at your thesis statement, and you should explain the thrust of your argument, while also referencing the key quotes or facts you will cite in your paper. Keep your argument as concrete as possible.

In a formal outline, as evident below, you should explain each step of your paper, paragraph by paragraph. One way to organize your paper according to an outline is to break down your thesis statement into a few key claims or "sub-theses," and you can address each of those claims in the topic sentences of your supporting paragraphs.

Sample Formal Outline for Five Paragraph Essay

- I. Introduction
 - A. Identify and explain your topic and its context
 - B. Thesis Statement
 - a. Sub-thesis 1

- b. Sub-thesis 2
 - c. Sub-thesis 3
- II. First Paragraph
 - A. Topic Sentence – Sub-thesis 1
 - a. Supporting Evidence
- III. Second Paragraph
 - a. Topic Sentence – Sub-thesis 2
 - i. Supporting Evidence
- IV. Third Paragraph
 - a. Topic Sentence – Sub-thesis 3
 - i. Supporting Evidence
- V. Conclusion
 - a. Restate Thesis Statement and Supporting Arguments
 - b. Draw larger conclusions, explain consequences