

OUTLINES: ORGANIZE YOUR IDEAS

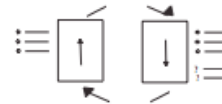
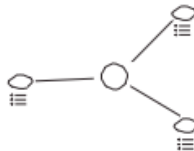
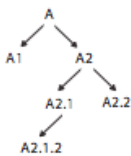
An outline is a simplified, organized representation of the ideas in an essay, presentation, or other piece of writing. Outlines are opportunities a) to experiment with different ways of organizing ideas, and b) to make your writing more efficient, confident, and clear – an outline is like the skeleton that supports the muscle of your ideas.

ROUGH OUTLINES

Before you write a formal outline it is probably worth trying a few looser, more creative ways to plan your writing. You can use sketches, flowcharts, mindmaps, lists, or coloured sticky notes.

For example, try putting each of your basic ideas on a sticky note. Now stick these notes on the wall, grouping ideas that seem to go together. Are there other ways to group these ideas? Does this simple activity help you imagine more than one possible structure for your project?

Another way to get started is to simply make quick sketches to help visualize your ideas and how they relate to each other. Here are three examples of some very simple types of structures you might use as starting points to visualize and organize your ideas:



The sketch on the left shows a hierarchy, with classifications and sub-classifications – this kind of structure might be good for discussing and analyzing postmodernism in art, for example. The middle sketch shows a central idea with equal, related themes around it – this might work for discussing a painting and its three main stylistic traits. The third shows a binary model – this might be good for describing the differences between modernism and postmodernism.

Note that diagrams and sketches like the ones above can be used to help structure entire essays or even individual paragraphs. Once you've experimented with basic visual and spatial models such as these, you can move on to a more formal outline, discussed below.

FORMAL OUTLINES

Below is an example of a straightforward, traditional outline. For your next assignment, see if a structure like this works for you:

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Identify your topic
- 1.2 Provide background and context about your topic
- 1.3 State your thesis and your main arguments

2 DEVELOPMENT

2.1 STATE YOUR FIRST ARGUMENT

- 2.1.1 Provide evidence supporting argument
- 2.1.2 Consider possible opposing arguments
- 2.1.3 Restate your arguments in response to opposition

2.2 STATE YOUR SECOND ARGUMENT

- 2.2.1 Provide evidence supporting argument
- 2.2.2 Consider possible opposing arguments
- 2.2.3 Restate your arguments in response to opposition

3 CONCLUSION

- 3.1 Restate your main arguments
- 3.2 Comment on what these points “mean” for the thesis
- 3.3 Close with a “take-away” for the reader (hopes, unfinished questions, future research, etc.)

The outline style above works linearly, top-to-bottom, the way traditional essays do (that’s one reason it is useful). It has a thesis and then it provides evidence to support the thesis. Notice how the number system is used to represent a logical hierarchy made up of topics and sub-topics, and indentation is used to help visualize the overall structure.

Not every text needs to have a traditional structure like the one above, but if you do try to create such an outline, remember that you can always change your ideas or structure later. The important thing to know is: It’s the process of outlining that really helps you develop and refine your ideas. By experimenting with different outlines you’re practicing your paper – figuring out if your ideas make sense and how they relate.

BONUS TIP:

For more help on structure and organization come to the WLC, check out textbooks and writing guides or browse university web sites such as Dartmouth College, at www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/toc.shtml