

OUTLINING CHEAT SHEET

PURPOSE OF OUTLINING

Even when an outline is not required as part of your assignment, outlining your paper before sitting down to write can help you clarify your thoughts. It will also help you plan ahead to make sure your paper is long enough and organize your thoughts in a logical sequence. If you have a plan before you begin writing, you can write your paper in pieces instead of sequentially, jumping between paragraphs as necessary to help avoid burnout and writer's block. This handout offers a few tips and tricks for creating a helpful outline.

WORKING OUTLINE

A working outline is an informal way to keep track of what your points are and what order they go in. Working outlines can be written in shorthand, using abbreviations and symbols that make sense to you, and you can easily edit/update your working outline at any time. You are the only person who will see your working outline, so it doesn't need to look nice. A working outline doesn't need levels of indentation or Roman numerals.

To create a working outline:

- ◆ List out all the points you want to make about your topic.
- ◆ Organize these points in an order sensible for your topic (order of importance, cause/effect, etc.).
- ◆ Flesh out each point with evidence: examples, brief explanations, quotes, and/or other references to sources.
- ◆ At this point, you should know approximately how long your paper will be based on the number of points (one paragraph per point) and the amount of supporting evidence for each point.
- ◆ If your paper looks like it will be too long for the word limit, cut some of the less important points. If it looks too short, add some more points or add more supporting evidence to your existing points.

THESIS STATEMENT

A thesis is a concise statement (usually one or two sentences) of your paper's argument. It is most helpful to draft a thesis statement early in the writing process, though you may edit it as the process continues. The thesis usually goes at the end of the intro paragraph.

EXAMPLES

For shorter papers: It may work to list out your main points in the thesis.

“People should travel as often as possible because travel allows them to experience new places, new foods, and new ideas.”

For longer papers: A more comprehensive statement of your argument is better for papers with lots of points.

“Because of the numerous societal and personal benefits, vaccinations should be required by law.”

PARAGRAPHS

A paragraph is a unit of writing that develops a single topic/point. Because each paragraph only covers one point, they are independent, modular pieces which you can easily move around to help the flow of your argument. Think of paragraphs both as “boxes” that each hold a point and as “vehicles” that carry the reader from one point in your argument to the next.

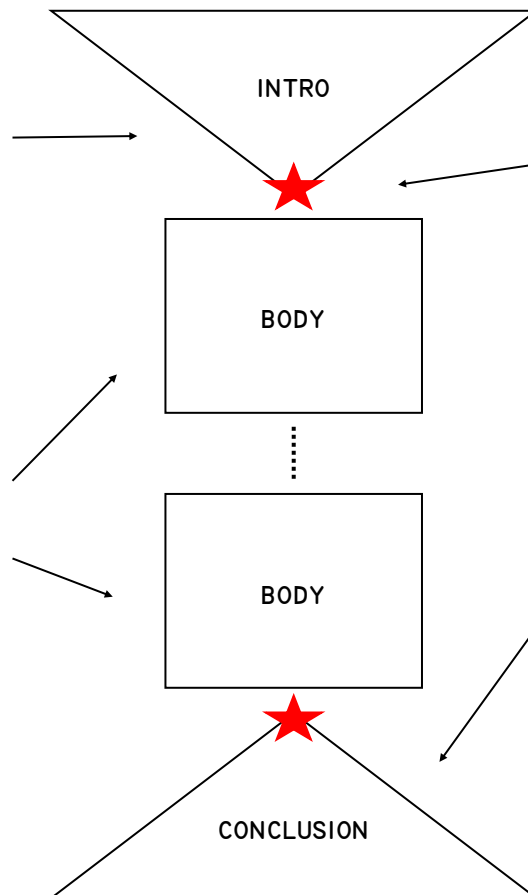
Things to remember about paragraphs:

- ◆ Every paragraph should have its own topic sentence and conclusion along with evidence to support the point. Therefore, anything shorter than three sentences cannot be a paragraph, and most paragraphs will be longer than three sentences.
- ◆ Although paragraphs are independent entities, your paper still needs to be a unified whole. Be sure to include transitions between paragraphs to help the flow of your argument.
- ◆ Spice up your paragraphs by writing sentences of varying structures and lengths.
- ◆ Within the paragraph, ask yourself: “Does this sentence forward my argument?” and “Does it fit/flow with the other sentences around it?”
- ◆ Looking at the whole paragraph, ask yourself: “Does this paragraph support my thesis statement?” and “Is this the best location for this paragraph in my paper?”

SAMPLE ESSAY DIAGRAM

The first paragraph should introduce your general topic then funnel down to your specific argument – the thesis statement. It is a good idea to either write a draft of the intro first with the intention of rewriting it later or to write the intro last (with the exception of the thesis).

Each body paragraph covers one point related to your thesis. These paragraphs are modular but still need to flow together. Use as many body paragraphs as necessary to fully support your thesis.



The thesis should go at the end of the intro paragraph. The body paragraphs should all flesh out and support the thesis.

The last paragraph should recap your paper’s argument and tie your whole paper together. It is best to start with a rephrased version of your thesis and then synthesize your main points. The conclusion should start specific but end broad. You could end with a poignant quote, propose a solution, or point to the broader implications of your argument. You could also ask a thought-provoking question.