

Outlining

The elements of your paper's outline become shaped by first developing a strong thesis statement. An outline structures the paper and organizes your main arguments, ideas, and supporting evidence to maintain the focus of the writing in support of your thesis.

The process of writing and organizing a paper begins with careful reading of the assignment instructions to be clear on the topic, purpose, audience, and required elements of the final paper. Developing an outline for your paper helps organize your research notes and source quotes and guides the writing of your draft to support your thesis. The outline serves as the roadmap or master plan of your paper. Always keep your assignment instructions, audience, and thesis in mind throughout the outlining process. Many assignment instructions already provide the main points a paper should contain, in which case the goal is to create a thesis statement broad enough to cover all required points and tie them together in support of a specific purpose for a specific audience.

Steps to Outlining a Paper

Developing a Strong Thesis Statement

An effective thesis statement functions as a directional signpost, providing clarity and focus for the reader on a particular topic's significance. This foundational statement shapes the major and minor points of the outline for the paper. The thesis statement moves well beyond a simple purpose statement or topic announcement; **it forms the basis of the paper's argument and sets the tone, substance, and direction of the writing in the reader's mind.** When composing a thesis statement, avoid simply stating the topic or purpose of the paper, but put into words the main idea and primary conclusion that will capture the reader's attention. The thesis statement must be in the form of a single, complete sentence that succinctly states the main subject or central argument of the paper along with the primary conclusion drawn from the research. For a guide to developing a thesis statement, refer to our Writing Aid "**Thesis Statements**," which includes examples and practice exercises.

Outlining

Once you have developed a strong thesis statement for your paper, it serves to shape the elements of your outline. **The outline structures the paper and organizes your main arguments, ideas, and supporting evidence to help maintain focused writing in support of your thesis.** Outline formats and requirements can vary widely based upon the type of research paper being written, the discipline or field of study, and the formatting and style guidelines for your particular discipline. Again, always refer to the assignment instructions for specific requirements or main points to be covered if an outline is to be submitted as one of the pre-writing steps of your paper. In general, most outlines include the following common elements:

- The **introduction paragraph** serves to engage the readers and to motivate them to continue reading, provides a brief discussion of the main topic or idea to be discussed in the paper, and then presents a **clear and strong thesis statement.**

- The body of the outline follows the introduction with two or more **main points** (*major inferences*) having at least two **supporting points** (*minor inferences*), each having paraphrased/quoted material from your sources (statistics, data, etc.).
- Following your last major inference, a **preliminary conclusion paragraph** sums up the main points and restates your thesis.

Common Outline Elements

- ❖ **Introduction**—The introduction serves to engage the readers and motivate them to continue reading the paper. It provides a brief discussion of the main topic or idea to be discussed and offers context to the readers on the paper's thesis.
- ❖ **Thesis/Purpose Statement**—Generally placed at the end of the introduction (though not always), the thesis statement must be in the form of a single, complete sentence that succinctly states the main subject or central argument of the paper along with the primary conclusion drawn from the research.
- ❖ **Main and Supporting Points** (*Major and Minor Inferences*)—Main points are the major topics of your paper in support of the thesis. These key points should provide clear positional statements that are relevant to the paper's central argument and move the paper toward the conclusion. Supporting or minor points are subtopics within the main points that help flesh out the major topics and provide the reader with supporting details, ideas, examples, or data.
- ❖ **Conclusion**—The preliminary conclusion in an outline both restates your paper's thesis statement and sums up the main points in support of the thesis. This paragraph should not simply repeat each main point and supporting point stated in the body of the paper. Also, avoid using identical wording found in the introduction paragraph. The focus of the conclusion reinforces the thesis and connects it to current research or the need for additional studies where evidence may be lacking.

Outlining Strategies and Outline Styles

Different outlines serve different purposes. They can take the form of **detailed notes** that describe the path the paper will take in supporting the thesis. Outlines can also be brief, **bullet-points that include only the main topics and supporting points** of the paper. Early outlines drafted during the pre-writing and research stages may only include your main points, becoming more detailed as the research progresses. Rough outlining is the first step toward an annotated outline that includes supporting evidence from your sources.

Organize the outline around issues, arguments, and analyses relevant to the thesis, rather than structuring the outline around your scholarly sources. Outlines differ from research notes, and while you will benefit from taking notes during the research phase, these notes are not an outline of the paper. An outline synthesizes information from a variety of sources and helps structure and connect the information in support of the thesis. (For a guide to synthesizing your information, refer to our Writing Aid "[Synthesizing Source Ideas for Your Research Paper](#).")

Most outlines use numbers and/or bullet points to arrange the major headings and supporting points that will be covered in the paper. **Organize your outline in the format that best fits the structure required for the type of paper assigned. However, always defer to the**

assignment instructions for any required main points to be covered in the paper or other specific outline requirements.

Roman numerals, letters, and numbers are commonly used to format the outline information based on the major and minor points to be covered in the paper. Other outline styles use bullet points or other symbols to visually organize the topics and supporting points. Outlines can be written using complete sentences, fragments, phrases, or words; however, strive for consistency across your major and minor inferences. Remember that the outline functions as an organizational tool of writing and can be adjusted based on new research uncovered that may lead you to reorganize your ideas and arguments.

Sample Outline Format

Introduction with thesis statement

I. First main point (major inference)

A. Supporting point (minor inference)

1. Subtopic/supporting evidence

2. Subtopic/supporting evidence

B. Supporting point

II. Second main point

A. Supporting point

B. Supporting point

III. Third main point

A. Supporting point

B. Supporting point

Conclusion