

Outlining Academic Humanities Essays

This document discusses what an essay outline is, the benefits of using an outline, and how to outline, respectively. It focuses specifically on academic essays in the humanities and human sciences—namely, arts essays.

What is an Outline?

An outline is a short, generally 1–2-page document, as a short-form overview of an essay. It outlines the essay, without providing meat or details. The structure is point form, with each point as a word, phrase, or short sentence. It is meant to accompany an essay, providing a bird’s-eye view of the paper at a glance and structuring your thoughts and the paper. Think of it as the framework or ‘blueprint’ of the paper. From this blueprint, we build the essay. Before building the house, we need a proper blueprint, or plan, so we can ensure its solid construction. This analogy works similarly for an essay.

An outline has, at the first level, major points depicting the essay’s body paragraphs. At the second level are subpoints that are meant to support the major points. At the third level, are subpoints for the subpoints, meant to support the level two subpoints. An outline can go even deeper to a fourth level, which are meant to support the sub-sub-points at the third level of support. However, we often don’t need to go four levels deep. In most cases, it’s fine to stay at level two, while sometimes dipping into level three support. The outline shows how an essay could, and ideally should, be structured.

The first level uses roman numerals, the second level uses capital letters, the third level uses numerals, and the fourth level uses lowercase letters.

See diagram 1 for what an academic essay outline template might look like. Note that the actual structure will differ based on the essay’s content.



Diagram 1: A Sample Academic Essay Outline Template

- i. Introduction
 - A. Background / context
 - B. Thesis Statement
- ii. *Major point 1*
 - A. *Subpoint 1*
 - 1. *Subpoint 1 evidence support 1*
 - a. *Fourth level support*
 - 2. *Subpoint 1 evidence support 2*
 - B. *Subpoint 2*
 - 1. *Subpoint 2 evidence support 1*
 - 2. *Subpoint 2 evidence support 2*
 - a. *Fourth level support*
- iii. *Major point 2*
 - A. *Subpoint 1*
 - 1. *Subpoint 1 evidence support*
 - a. *Fourth level support*
 - B. *Subpoint 2*
 - 1. *Subpoint 2 evidence support*
 - a. *Fourth level support*
- iv. *Major point 3*
 - A. *Subpoint 1*
 - 1. *Subpoint 1 evidence support*
 - B. *Subpoint 2*
 - 1. *Subpoint 2 evidence support*
 - a. *Fourth level support*
 - C. *Subpoint 3*
 - 1. *Subpoint 3 evidence support 1*
 - a. *Fourth level support*
 - 2. *Subpoint 3 evidence support 2*
 - a. *Fourth level support*
- v. Conclusion
 - A. Restate thesis
 - B. Wrap up



Why Use an Outline?

An outline is useful for several reasons.

Bird's eye view: First, an outline gives a bird's-eye view of the paper. It can be easy to get lost in the trees and miss the layout of the forest, or lose ourselves in the details of the essay and miss the essay's bigger picture and point. It's basically a 'map' of the essay. Longer essays can especially benefit from them.

Easy restructuring: Second, it allows for easy restructuring of the paper. Instead of reading through entire paragraphs and pages of the paper, all we need to do with the outline is shift around a few bullet points. Once the outline is changed, we can then easily see which paragraphs or sections need rearranging and just copy-paste within the essay itself. It's a time saver!

A check for relevance of material: Third, an outline acts as a check to see if the body of the essay is on topic, and there is no irrelevant material. Essays can be long and have many details and points. All body material should support the thesis. Material that doesn't support the thesis should be removed. Material that supports the thesis weakly can optionally be removed, especially if the essay already has other strong support.

While writing, we might think "oh, this could be relevant, so let's add it in" or start a rabbit hole of justification or even dive deeper into a tangent that could be stated briefly and moved on. Some people write by just throwing all their ideas onto the page. Hence, it's very easy to get off track when writing our thoughts. The outline keeps us on track.

An easy start to the essay: A proper outline that uses phrases or sentences can basically be copy-pasted into another file in the same order and without the bullet points. Then, we can add in some signposting (linking sentences) to make the essay flow, and we have a first draft of the paper! See WILCOX WRITING's Writing Center document "Beginning your Humanities Essay" for how to easily start an essay with this method.

How Do I Outline?

Outlining is easy once we have a template. The hardest part is figuring out what ideas will go into the essay and what to put into the outline.

An essay's structure will look the same between essays, at least in certain respects. However, it's also important to note that flow, personal style, convention, and the art of writing can change how the paper should be structured. It's a balance of



expectations, convention, coherence, and flow. An outline might seem like a recipe, or algorithm, for structuring an essay. While the outline is essentially a recipe, it's also important to note to taste the recipe for imbalances (or in our case, read the essay itself). Writing is more an art than science. Essays can deviate from the expected structure for many reasons—for instance, rhetorical, artistic, or in making a statement. In general, it's good to stick to convention until the convention is mastered, and then the essay can be altered or tweaked for personal style and artistic reasons. If you're new to outlines and essay writing, it's best to adhere to this formula, for now at least.

In general, an outline has three sections, corresponding to the major parts of an essay.

1. Introduction
2. Body
3. Conclusion

Each of these three main sections will contain different parts.

Introduction

The introduction introduces the essay, orients the reader to the topic, and contains the essay's thesis and background information. The introduction announces, "Here I am, here's what I am, and here's what I do."

1. Introduction
 - a. Background / context
 - b. Thesis statement

It may optionally contain a 'hook' and a paper map. A hook is a sentence or two that captures the reader's interest, or 'hooks,' the reader. A paper map is useful for longer essays, but not as much for short essays of only a few pages. Some disciplines, like philosophy, expect paper maps.

1. Introduction
 - a. Hook
 - b. Background
 - c. Thesis statement
 - d. Paper map

In general, we structure the paper in this order. This can be done as one paragraph usually in about one page, or for long essays it may span several paragraphs or



pages. We can add information under “hook,” “background,” and “paper map” as subpoints for exactly what to write for those parts. For example:

1. Introduction
 - e. Hook
 - i. What my hook is about
 - f. Background
 - i. Background point 1
 - ii. Background point 2
 - iii. Background point 3
 - iv. ...
 - g. Thesis statement: Here is my thesis statement.
 - h. Paper map
 - i. First thing I do
 - ii. Second thing I do
 - iii. Third thing I do
 - iv. ...

Body

The body of the essay contains multiple paragraphs. Each paragraph should generally be one point, or unit, of support for the thesis. We can think of it as one of the *reasons* justifying our thesis. A reason is a major point of the essay.

Body

2. Reason 1
3. Reason 2
4. Reason 3
5. Reason 4

Each of these reasons will generally be one paragraph and corresponds to the *topic sentence* of that paragraph. A topic sentence is the first or second sentence of a paragraph that dictates the topic of that paragraph, or what that paragraph is about. We use as many reasons as we find suitable, based on essay type, topic, discipline, purpose, and word count. We want a balance of word count to reasons. More reasons are usually always better; however, we want to explain and treat those reasons with sufficient space. Depth is usually better than breadth in academic essays, especially at the graduate level.

Each reason should have sub-reasons, or support for that reason or topic sentence.

Body

2. Reason 1 (topic sentence paragraph 1)



- a. Supporting reason 1
- b. Supporting reason 2
- c. Supporting reason 3
3. Reason 2 (topic sentence paragraph 2)
 - a. Supporting reason 1
 - b. Supporting reason 2
 - c. Supporting reason 3
4. Reason 3 (topic sentence paragraph 3)
 - a. Supporting reason 1
 - b. Supporting reason 2
 - c. Supporting reason 3
5. Reason 4 (topic sentence paragraph 4)
 - a. Supporting reason 1
 - b. Supporting reason 2
 - c. Supporting reason 3

Supporting reasons are usually reasons themselves, or can be evidence, like statistics, in support of a major point or reason. We use as many supporting reasons as we need and find suitable, using the same considerations as we noted above (type, topic, discipline, purpose, and word count). We don't always need three supporting reasons for all the main reasons.

At this point, it's fine to think of each reason or topic sentence as one paragraph. However, it's also important to consider the flow of the essay. We want to remember that we don't want to get locked into thinking that we *must* adhere to this structure exactly and the idea of one reason and all its supporting reasons as one paragraph. For instance, it's fine to split up paragraphs that have broad topic sentences. E.g.,

"There are three perspectives concerning [topic], [perspective 1], [perspective 2], and [perspective 3]."

In this case, we could add all perspectives under one paragraph or split each perspective into its own paragraph, even if the three perspectives are considered one reason, or unit, of support for the thesis. We don't generally want a paragraph longer than one page single spaced or two pages double spaced (but again, writing is an art, and so this isn't dogma).

We can go deeper to the third level, and all the things mentioned here for the sub-points at level 2 apply to the third level sub-sub-points. The only difference is that the third level directly supports the second level, while also indirectly supporting the first level. The second or third level support can be reasons or evidence, like



statistics or something someone said. “I say [Reason 1/sub-point], because [reasons/evidence].”

Conclusion

The conclusion of the essay can be the hardest to write. The conclusion depends most on the content of the essay, and so, while having a rough general format, will be different depending on the essay. There is no real expected format for a conclusion other than summarizing the essay and leaving the reader with something to think about. It’s meant to wrap up the essay into a neat little bow. Nonetheless, here is a recommended structure:

6. Conclusion
 - a. Restate thesis
 - b. Tie together what has been said (not merely repeating what has been said)
 - c. Future research direction(s) / projections / limitations
 - d. Concluding thought

It is important at this point to not introduce new material or reasons in the conclusion. It’s meant to take what has been said and wrap it up nicely with a bow. It’s also meant to point toward what the essay or research entails, that is, what would be next if we accepted what has been said in the essay. For instance, if we concluded that because of reasons 1, 2, and 3, that global warming is, in fact, rapidly advancing, we might then motion towards potential actions or lines of research that might be taken to slow this advance. “If what we have said in this essay is true, then we might consider looking at reasons for slowing down global warming. This is the work for future research.”

We also don’t want to simply restate what was said in the essay in order.

Structuring vs Revision Outlines

There are two kinds of outlines, or rather, two ways to use them, at different stages of the writing process. So far, we have discussed the structuring outline. This structuring outline is the outline created *before* any writing at all.

A revision outline is created later, after the essay has been completed. This outline we work from end finished product to blueprint (rather than blueprint to finished product, like in the structuring outline). A revision outline can serve two purposes: First, it shows if what was created aligns with the original structuring outline. It’s easy to note differences and see two possible structures of the essay.



Second, it can be used as part of the revision process. We can note whether the thesis statement needs revision, or if any irrelevant material is in the essay and that needs to be cut. So, we use one to build the essay prior to writing, and one to “snapshot” the finished essay to note its structure at a glance.

Putting it All Together

Now that we have explained each section by itself, let’s look at how everything fits together. Let’s translate an outline into an essay. See our outline template below. Translating the essay from the outline is done in several simple steps: Remove the bullet points, remove “introduction” and “conclusion,” and concatenate the phrases. Optionally we can add in signposting and linking sentences to increase flow.

- i. Introduction
 - A. Hook
 - B. Background / context
 - C. Thesis Statement
 - D. Paper map
- ii. *Major point 1*
 - A. *Subpoint 1*
 - 1. *Subpoint 1 evidence support 1*
 - a. *Fourth level support*
 - 2. *Subpoint 1 evidence support 2*
 - B. *Subpoint 2*
 - 1. *Subpoint 2 evidence support 1*
 - 2. *Subpoint 2 evidence support 2*
 - a. *Fourth level support*
- iii. *Major point 2*
 - A. *Subpoint 1*
 - 1. *Subpoint 1 evidence support*
 - a. *Fourth level support*
 - B. *Subpoint 2*
 - 1. *Subpoint 2 evidence support*
 - a. *Fourth level support*
- iv. *Major point 3*
 - A. *Subpoint 1*
 - 1. *Subpoint 1 evidence support*
 - B. *Subpoint 2*
 - 1. *Subpoint 2 evidence support*
 - a. *Fourth level support*
 - C. *Subpoint 3*



1. *Subpoint 3 evidence support 1*
 - a. *Fourth level support*
 2. *Subpoint 3 evidence support 2*
 - a. *Fourth level support*
- v. Conclusion
- A. Restate thesis
 - B. Tie together what has been said.
 - C. Future research direction(s) / projections / limitations
 - D. Concluding thought

Again, all we do is remove the bullet points, remove “introduction” and “conclusion” and then concatenate, or ‘glue together,’ what goes within the same paragraph. We’ll also have to distinguish where paragraphs start and end. The introduction is one paragraph to several paragraphs. Each main point is a new paragraph. The conclusion starts a new paragraph, too. Let’s start with removing the bullet points. Dictating paragraphs is as easy as leaving a blank line or even inserting a hyphen or other symbol to mark off potential paragraphs.

Hook

Background / context

Thesis Statement

Paper map

Major point 1

Subpoint 1

Subpoint 1 evidence support 1

Fourth level support

Subpoint 1 evidence support 2

Subpoint 2

Subpoint 2 evidence support 1

Subpoint 2 evidence support 2

Fourth level support

Major point 2

Subpoint 1

Subpoint 1 evidence support

Fourth level support

Subpoint 2

Subpoint 2 evidence support

Fourth level support



Major point 3
Subpoint 1
Subpoint 1 evidence support
Subpoint 2
Subpoint 2 evidence support
Fourth level support
Subpoint 3
Subpoint 3 evidence support 1
Fourth level support
Subpoint 3 evidence support 2
Fourth level support

Restate thesis
Tie together what has been said.
Future research direction(s) / projections / limitations
Concluding thought

Now, we concatenate. Add in tabs where the paragraphs begin.

Hook. Background / context. Thesis Statement. Paper map.

Major point 1. Subpoint 1. Subpoint 1 evidence support 1. Fourth level support.
Subpoint 1 evidence support 2. Subpoint 2. Subpoint 2 evidence support 1. Subpoint 2
evidence support 2. Fourth level support.

Major point 2. Subpoint 1. Subpoint 1 evidence support. Fourth level support.
Subpoint 2. Subpoint 2 evidence support. Fourth level support.

Major point 3. Subpoint 1. Subpoint 1 evidence support. Subpoint 2. Subpoint 2
evidence support. Fourth level support. Subpoint 3. Subpoint 3 evidence support 1. Fourth
level support. Subpoint 3 evidence support 2. Fourth level support.

Restate thesis. Tie together what has been said. Future research direction(s) /
projections / limitations. Concluding thought.

This is what the essay would look like in essay form, constructed from the outline.
There are five paragraphs. Instead of these placeholder phrases, we add in our
actual thesis statement, reasons, and support, as depicted in our completed
structuring outline. In this outline, the fourth paragraph might be a bit long depending
on the content, so we could also cut that into two or three paragraphs, making
paragraphs at one or more of the subpoints.



After this step, we can read through what we've written as an essay to see if we can rephrase and refine. We can also add in signposting and linking sentences at the start and end of paragraphs. For instance,

"Now that we have seen [major point 1], let us look at how [major point 2] impacts our thesis."

Signposting makes essays easier to follow, but we don't put those in our outline. Outlines are for points and ideas only, not signposts. The signposts make everything flow together easier and provide a 'sign' of where the reader currently is based on the paper map depicted in the introduction.

Conclusion

After reviewing this document, you should now understand what an outline is and how to outline. You should also be able to plan a paper and complete an outline on your own. Finally, you know how to go from outline to essay. Go forth and outline!

For more writing documents and to get help with your writing, visit www.wilcoxwriting.ca. By subscribing to our newsletter, you get access to our Writing Center and free writing documents.

