



Outlining

To generate and structure ideas for writing, writers often need a tool to organize and define their thoughts. One of the best ways to do this is to make an outline. The Purdue Online Writing Lab offers four steps for outlining: brainstorm, organize, order, and label (Tardiff and Brizee). Use the headings and related questions below as a guide to create an outline following these steps.

BRAINSTORM

Determine your (hypo)thesis.

- What do you want to focus on in the paper? What is the main claim or argument that you will develop?

Gather your evidence.

- What evidence have you found to support, develop, and evolve this thesis?
- Several strategies may help you in gathering evidence:
 - *Clustering*—In the middle of a sheet of paper, write down and circle your main idea; then draw lines outward to other related ideas as they occur to you. These might be examples, confirming evidence, exceptions, or questions. Circle these also. Draw lines between related circles.
 - *Free-writing*—Set a timer for 5–10 minutes and write without stopping. Do not censor yourself or edit your ideas during this time; instead, focus on producing material and generating ideas.

ORGANIZE

Arrange your evidence.

- What ideas go together? Which don't fit?
- Which ideas make more sense when they come before or after other ideas?

ORDER

Form paragraphs.

- How are your ideas related? Group like evidence together.
- How do these ideas together form paragraphs to support and develop your thesis?
- In what order do these paragraphs build on one another to support your thesis (e.g., you might move from general to specific or build to your strongest example)?

LABEL

Give these paragraphs headings and subheadings to use for your outline.

- Based on your paragraphs, what are the main parts of your paper? What are the subparts?

Work Cited

Tardiff, Elyssa and Allen Brizee. "Why and How to Create a Useful Outline." *The Purdue OWL*, Purdue U Writing Lab, 2016, <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/544/02/>.



Reverse Outlining

Reverse outlining is useful when you have already written a paper that you need help organizing. By outlining the content of the paper (i.e., reverse outlining), you can (re)discover the focus of your paper and organize your thoughts. Follow the steps below. You do so in the margins of your paper or in a separate document.

1. Identify your thesis. Write this at the top of the paper.
2. Number each paragraph and identify its topic. What is the main idea of each paragraph? Write this down next to the paragraph number.
3. Identify how these topics connect to your thesis. How does the point of each paragraph support or develop what you are arguing in the paper? In other words, what does each paragraph do? Write this down beside the main idea of each paragraph.
 - a. For example: In a paper ranking influential musicians of the 18th century, a paragraph about Mozart might develop the thesis of the paper by providing evidence of why he was one of the era's most influential musicians.

This list of what each paragraph says and does serves as your “reverse outline”—something that can help you determine if your paragraphs all relate to your thesis and are in the most effective order (Brizee).

What do I do now? How to use your reverse outline:

- ✓ Does your paragraph relate to the thesis?
 - Now that you have determined the content and function of each paragraph, check to see if each of your paragraphs relates back to your thesis statement. Do they all support your main claim? If not, it's time to think about how they can be restructured or changed (or even removed) to support the thesis.
- ✓ Do your paragraphs as a whole connect in a way that logically supports your thesis?
 - Look at your paragraphs collectively. Does the way they're arranged make sense? Should any be moved earlier or later in the paper? Should any paragraphs be combined or separated?
- ✓ Do all your paragraphs make sense as part of the paper?
 - Make sure that all your paragraphs relate back to the thesis. If there are any paragraphs that seem to talk about your subject but don't support the thesis, consider removing or revising them.
- ✓ Is there anything missing?
 - Check to see if all your paragraphs are there—that is, is there any material that could comprise another paragraph that isn't in your paper yet? If so, consider adding another paragraph. This is a good time to see where it might fit best. You might need to do some additional research.

Work Cited

Brizee, Allen. “Reverse Outlining: An Exercise for Taking Notes and Revising Your Work.” *The Purdue OWL*, Purdue U Writing Lab, 2016, <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/689/1/>.