

Outlining an Essay

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What is an outline?

Outlining is a technique for planning and organizing your research paper before you write. An outline is a list of all the ideas you want to include in your paper, organized in a way that demonstrates a relationship between those ideas.

What's the point?

Your finished outline will serve as a map for your writing. Following it will help keep you on topic and ensure a logical flow of ideas in your final paper. Outlining helps you determine how your ideas fit together, the best order to introduce each idea, and whether you have sufficient evidence to support every point you want to make. Having an outline can also help avoid “writer’s block,” because you’ll have a reminder of everything you want to say once you’re ready to write.

How should it look?

Outlines aren’t just bulleted lists of thoughts. They have a formal structure that relies on letters, numbers, and indentation to describe the relationship of one idea to another. Your ideas will be presented in a hierarchy demonstrated by alternating Roman numerals, capital letters, Arabic numerals, and lower-case letters, ranking the ideas from most general to most specific. Ideas sharing the same type of designation (such as A, B, and C or 1, 2, and 3) should be of roughly equal breadth and importance. The further a line is indented, the more specific the idea should be. Check out the back of this handout for an example outline.

Where should I start?

1. Decide on a thesis for your paper.
2. List the main ideas supporting your thesis. Label these ideas with Roman numerals.
3. Below each of your main points, increase the indent and list supporting statements that explain something about the larger idea. Label these with capital letters.
4. Below each capital letter, increase the indent and expand on your supporting statements with related ideas like definitions, background information, or examples. This level should be labeled with Arabic numerals.
5. Continue to develop each of these subcategories as needed to fully support your ideas.
6. Arrange the items in each category in a logical order - for example, chronologically or from least to most important. Each item in a subcategory should relate to the larger point directly above it.

How do I use my outline when I'm ready to write?

Use your outline as a map; introduce each idea into your paper in the order it appears on your outline. You may also use your outline as a checklist to make sure everything you wanted to say made it into your paper. For each category, try to dedicate a similar amount of space in your writing. This can help guide you in determining how much time to spend on each idea. For example, points A, B, and C may each consist of one paragraph or, in a longer paper, an entire subheading.

Where can I get more help?

For more information and sample outlines courtesy of the Purdue OWL, visit www.bit.ly/owloutline
Or, for one-on-one help from a librarian, call or visit the Research Help Desk.

Monterey Park Library: (323) 415-4134

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Sample Outline

Thesis: Cats make excellent pets.

- I. Cats perform most of the same behaviors people expect and enjoy from other pets, including dogs.
 - A. They're very affectionate.
 - 1. They frequently curl up on your lap.
 - 2. They sometimes try to groom their human companions.
 - 3. Their purring can be relaxing and may have therapeutic effects on human bones and muscles.
 - B. They can be playful.
 - 1. Contrary to popular belief, although cats sleep a lot (15 hours per day on average), they are actually very active, especially when young.
 - 2. Due to their predatory instincts, cats enjoy chasing toys such as laser pointers or a dangled bit of string.
 - 3. They especially enjoy play that involves their human companions.
 - C. Cats can be trained.
 - 1. Cats are very intelligent and respond well to positive reinforcement.
 - 2. Using treats as rewards, it is possible to train a cat to perform tricks like high-five, sit, or fetch.
 - 3. They can also be trained to avoid unwanted behaviors like scratching furniture.
- II. Cats are polite housemates.
 - A. They rarely make loud noises.
 - 1. Though they can be territorial, they won't bark at visitors or passing strangers.
 - 2. They usually don't make noise if you're away, because they only meow to communicate with humans.
 - 3. As a result, you don't have to be concerned about noise complaints from roommates or neighbors.
 - B. Cats rarely have "accidents."
 - 1. Cats are naturally inclined to urinate and defecate within a small area.
 - 2. They're taught this behavior by their mother while young so they require very little training.
 - 3. If a cat does urinate outside its litterbox, it's often a sign of a medical issue.
 - C. Destructive behavior by cats is easily prevented.
 - 1. Cats do need to sharpen their claws to keep them from becoming too long.
 - 2. Providing a scratching post is usually enough to deter cats from damaging your furniture.
 - 3. Cats rarely behave destructively out of anxiety (as is common in dogs).
- III. Caring for cats is easy.
 - A. Cats don't have to be walked.
 - 1. You can train a cat to walk on a leash if you want, but it isn't necessary.
 - 2. Cats can get plenty of exercise from playing indoors.
 - 3. They use a litter box so they don't have to go outside to "do their business."
 - B. They take care of their own grooming.
 - 1. Professional pet groomers can be expensive.
 - 2. Cats are very vigilant about their hygiene.
 - 3. You may have to trim their dewclaws occasionally, but this is a quick process and easily done at home using regular fingernail clippers.
 - C. They can be left at home alone for several hours.
 - 1. Cats are less likely than dogs to experience separation anxiety.
 - 2. Since they use litterboxes, they don't need to be let outside.
 - 3. Experts advise that most cats can be left alone for up to 12 hours at a time without suffering from stress or boredom.