Creating an Outline

Inquire: A Framework for Your Paper

Overview

Writing a paper is, in some ways, like building a house. You start with a foundation, then build a frame, add supporting structure, and finally close it all in and add the final details. When writing a paper, if your thesis is your foundation, then your outline is the frame. An outline will help you build the structure of your paper by giving you a framework to both categorize your subtopics and organize them in a logical way.

Big Question: How do I visualize the structure of my paper?

Watch: Outlining Your Structure

Cable television networks like HGTV and DIY have brought the construction industry into everyone’s living room. We can watch enterprising novice builders purchase, restore, and sell homes - in a practice called flipping. And those interested in tiny homes can watch these micro-mansions be built from scratch. Our understanding of home construction is now just one 60-minute television show away.

Writing a paper is, in some ways, a bit like building a house. You start with a foundation, then build a frame, add supporting structure, and finally close it all in and add the final details. When writing a paper, if your thesis is the foundation, then your outline is the frame. An outline will help you build the structure of your paper by giving you a framework to categorize your subtopics, and then organize them in a logical way.

Because it is mainly focused on structuring your paper, outlining can be considered a more rigid and defined form of brainstorming. When preparing an outline, you will need to already have an idea of what your thesis will be. As you create the outline, you identify the body paragraphs that support your idea. You also make a first pass at putting those paragraphs in a logical order.

The first draft of your outline gives you a structure to work with. Now you can refine your outline, visualizing the movement, or flow, of the points you will make in your paper. When outlining, you want to remember to keep your mind focused on what kind of paper you are writing, and to formulate the progress of your discussion or argument accordingly. You use your outline to define your main points, their subordinate points, and the sequence of your presentation. In other words, your outline is a map.

Outlining can also be useful for identifying the best ways to support your thesis. Just as the frame of a house can determine which materials are needed and how they are used, an outline will help you determine what kinds of sources you need to use, how to use them, and which subtopics are the most
effectively supported by those sources. This, in turn, will further help you finalize decisions about how to organize your paper.

What are some ways you’ve applied a structure to a discussion or argument in the past? How did you visualize that structure, and did it help you build a more effective argument?

Read: The Structure of a Paper

The Goal of the Outline

Outlines offer structure. When using an outline to build your paper’s structure, the headings and subheadings can define each element of your thesis and organize your thought process. This will make it easier to develop your paper in a cohesive and logical way.

Outlining is primarily a tool used for two things: categorizing subtopics and organizing your paper. Categorizing your subtopics will help you analyze your own thesis, specify what subtopics make up the substance of your paper, and understand how they relate to each other. Organizing your paper in an outline will allow you to think about how you want the information in your paper to flow, and the impact it will have on your reader. The optimal time to introduce outlining into your process is once you have identified your basic idea and have developed a thesis statement.

Formatting an Outline

Consistent with its focus on structure, the outline format is somewhat more rigid than other brainstorming techniques. To build an outline, start by writing your thesis at the top of the page. Then create a list of categories that represent your main subtopics. Under each category heading, write at least one subheading that coincides with the subtopic you will write about in that body paragraph of your paper. Under each subtopic, write at least one subheading that supports that subtopic, such as a piece of evidence from a source. Your outline should look something like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Category 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Subtopic 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Support for subtopic 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Category 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Subtopic 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Support for subtopic 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Support for subtopic 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Category 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Subtopic 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Support for subtopic 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Subtopic 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Support for subtopic 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indenting and labeling each step like the example shown above will help you separate each part of your outline, thus giving you a better visual distinction between each category and subtopic. Again, outlines are meant to help you break down an idea and figure out how to discuss that idea in a logical, organized way, so the format should reflect that.
Categorizing Your Subtopics

While it is often thought of as primarily being a structural tool, outlining can also help break down your main idea into its component parts. This is the categorization aspect of outlining. Understanding the distinct subtopics at the heart of your thesis will help you decide how to structure your paper and will also help guide you in finding supporting evidence.

Before writing your outline, think about the different aspects of your thesis, breaking it down into different points that you need to discuss in detail to support your thesis. You might use another brainstorming tool, such as clustering, to help you do this, but listing them as they come to you is also fine.

Next, define these subtopics in terms of the categories they apply to. For example, if your thesis is “The role of libraries in modern civilization is expanding,” you might have subtopics about such issues as helping people find jobs, genealogy research, and book clubs. In this example, each of these could be categorized as economics, history, and sociology, respectively. If you find more than one topic can fit a single category, you might discuss both of these subtopics as part of the same point, or use whichever you think is the strongest subtopic.

This process also works in reverse. If you are having trouble thinking of subtopics that you want to discuss in your paper, try listing some general categories that relate to your thesis. Then, think of some points that relate to those categories. These points can be loosely related to your thesis, but try to think specifically, and build on the general categories you’ve limited yourself to.

In your outline, list the categories you’ve come up with as sub-headings under your thesis, then write the subtopic under the categories to which they belong. If a subtopic fits multiple categories, you can list that topic under both categories, then decide where to discuss this subtopic when you move on to organization.

Organizing Your Paper

As far as organization is concerned, outlines allow you to visualize the structure of your paper and adjust the order in which you cover the subtopics of your thesis to better suit the logical flow of your discussion or argument.

After you have your categories and subtopics listed as part of your outline, under each subheading for a subtopic, write at least one element of support for that subtopic. The purpose here is to help you see which of the subtopics that you’ve decided to use have the most support, the strongest support, and how that support is interrelated. For instance, depending on the type of paper you are writing, you may have a source that you use twice for two different subtopics. This will impact how you organize your paper, because if you’ve introduced a source in one paragraph, you won’t want to reintroduce it with the same depth in the next paragraph, as you would be repeating yourself.

In addition, understanding the relative strength and amount of support each argument has will help you decide the order in which you cover each point. For example, if you are writing an essay with three subtopics, and thus three body paragraphs, you may want to organize it with your second strongest subtopic first in order to show your reader that your thesis is well-supported, the least strong subtopic next, and finish with your strongest subtopic to leave your reader with a strong impression of your argument.
Again, these are just examples of ways you might use your outline to understand how to organize your paper. Leave yourself open to exploring different ways of presenting and sequencing your ideas, but make sure that your approach is always informed by your thesis. Never lose sight of the basic goal of your paper.

Reflect: The Versatility of the Outline

Poll

As stated above, outlines are most often used to build the structure of a paper. However, people can approach how they use the structure of an outline in various ways.

Which of the following statements below best reflects your use of outlines?

- I use outlines to help me organize my thoughts.
- I use outlines to decide on the structure of my paper.
- I don’t normally use outlines.
- I use outlines to find which subtopics are best for my paper.
- I use outlines only when someone else instructs me to use them.

Expand: Non-Traditional Outlines

Overview: Using the Best Tool

Like any other writing exercise, outlining is a tool that should help you achieve your goal. If you find that the traditional structure of an outline just isn’t working for you, you might try bending the rules of what constitutes an outline to suit your thought process. Non-traditional outlines offer a means of structuring your thinking while still allowing you the freedom to follow your own way toward the specific goal you have in mind.

Guided Clustering

Guided clustering takes the basic clustering exercise and adds a few more rules to create a more structurally-inclined exercise. Start by writing your thesis in the center of your paper. Circle your thesis, then write the first three subjects that come to mind that are related to your thesis, again circling these words. Now draw lines connecting each of these to your thesis. They don’t necessarily need to be completely different from each other, and they may be more specific versions of another subject.

Now, write subtopics around these subjects. Circle and connect them to whichever subject relates most closely to each subtopic. You may connect more than one subtopic to a subject, and you may end up not using a subject at all. Don’t limit yourself as to how many subtopics you write down. You don’t need to use all of them in your essay; just getting them written down may stimulate your thought process. Finally, list sources that you might use for your paper, connecting these sources to the subtopics you think might make use of them for support.

Once you’ve finished, you should have a map showing how each subtopic connects to your thesis by subject, as well as clusters showing you which subtopics have the most, or strongest, support.
Descriptive Outlines

A descriptive outline is loosely based on the concept of freewriting. Like clustering, freewriting is another brainstorming technique. With descriptive outlines, instead of writing without a goal in mind, your focus will be in writing your thoughts as subtopics related to your thesis. As with a normal outline, each sentence or short group of sentences will be a separate line describing a subtopic you will use and how you will support it. The benefit of descriptive outlining over a conventional outline is that you are free to let your mind explore the possibilities of each point as you write it. By removing the overt focus on structure, you can instead work toward developing the body of your essay in a more freeform mental space.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

An article with helpful advice for how to best use an outline
- http://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/outline
- Source: University of Southern California

This website features an in-depth example of a traditional outline
- https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/544/03/
- Source: Online Writing Lab, Purdue University

This article includes another in-depth look at outlines with more helpful advice
- http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/outline.html
- Source: Writing Center: University of Richmond

Lesson Glossary

- **outline**: a brainstorming tool primarily used for categorizing your subtopics and organizing your paper
- **clustering**: a structured technique to get started with writing based on associations and listing
- **freewriting**: a structured technique to get started with writing that involves continuously writing for a designated period of time without concern for evaluation of content or form

Check Your Knowledge

1. An outline is a tool primarily used for what?
   A. categorizing subtopics and organizing your paper
   B. developing the thesis of your paper
   C. determining which sources you should use for your paper
   D. helping to revise your paper

2. You should have a good idea of what your thesis is before you start an outline.
   A. True
   B. False
3. Each subtopic should only have one element of support listed underneath it.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:

Citations

Lesson Content:
Authored and curated by Matt Huigens for The TEL Library. CC BY NC SA 4.0