**Outlining**

By Allie Donahue and Lydia McDermott

Essays need structure. Structure helps a reader follow an essay’s logical arc. Some writers like to outline before they start writing and others like to outline in the midst of the writing process to check in on their logic. Many writers outline multiple times over the course of writing a single essay. Outlining can be difficult because no outline is the same—instead, outlines depend on the content of your essay. This handout includes steps to help you develop an outline specific to your essay. You can follow these steps at any time in the writing process. On the back, you’ll find some common organizational structures for papers across disciplines.

1. **Brainstorm**

Take notes on your topic. Ask questions. Generate ideas. Don’t limit yourself.

1. **Grouping**

Group your notes/ideas/quotes into categories. You may do this on the computer or by physically arranging papers into piles.

1. **Develop a working thesis**

What argument arises from your notes? What point do you want to make? If you’re in the early stages of writing, you may arrive at a **driving question** rather than a thesis statement.

1. **Organize**

How will you support your thesis? What evidence do you need? Re-order your note categories into an order that demonstrates the evolution of your thesis.

1. **Synthesize**

You now have the raw material of your essay arranged in a logical order. Think about how you want to present this information in your essay. Synthesize each category of notes into main ideas that will drive your paragraphs.

1. **Outline**

Arrange these main ideas into an outline. It is common to use roman numerals to denote the dependency of certain ideas on others. Some people like to use full sentences in their outlines. Other simply use phrases as placeholders for ideas they will develop into sentences later in the writing process. Either way is right—use an outline that works for you and your paper.

**Top 4 reasons to outline**

Outlines…

1. Clarify your own thoughts

“Aha! That is how those two thoughts connect!”

1. Identify weaknesses in your argument

“Wait. I thought they connected. But now I see they don’t.”

1. Stay on track

“Okay. That was a cool thought, but it has nothing to do with my thesis.”

1. Save time

“Hurrah! I didn’t have to write all the way through that one off-topic thought to realize it was off topic.”

**1. IMRAD** (This is an explicit model of the American Psychological Association, but is used in some form across sciences and social sciences. Humanities papers tend to be less rigid in the borders of these sections, but may still cover them generally.

[Abstract]

***I****ntroduction*—Define the problem and summarize relevant previous studies, importance, possible solution: hypothesis or research question.

***M****ethods*—How did you study the problem? What materials did you use? What were your procedures?

***R****esults*—Report main results (common, best, or exception) in past tense.

***A****nd*

***D****iscussion*—Summarize most important findings. What conclusions can you draw? What additional research needs to be done? How do your results fit into a broader context?

**Variations** (social sciences and some humanities):

*Abstract, Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology/Theoretical Approach, Object description, Analysis*, and *Conclusion*.

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**2. Aristotelean Model**

*Introduction*

*State your case* (clarify the issue, define terms)

*Proposition* (main claim or thesis, with sub-claims mapped out)

*Refutation* (anticipate the opposition and refute it)

*Proof* (Develop your own logic and evidence)

*Conclusion*

**3. Toulmin model**

*Claims* (of fact, of definition, of cause, of value, of policy—use to establish your case)

*Data* (information to support claims)

*Warrant* (assumption made by writer in order for claim to be true)

*Backing* (how you support the warrant)

*Rebuttal* (consider opposing view and argue against it)

*Qualifier* (qualify your initial claims to arrive at a conclusion)

**4. Analytical Writing** (across the disciplines)

*Introduction*—Gives a context (Not a broad context like the history of the world, but the specific context, like the text, the problem, a particular passage).

*Thesis Statement—*Both arguable and defendable, but specific to the object you are analyzing. Can be 1-2 sentences, usually toward end of Introduction.

*Body of Analysis—*Number and length of paragraphs varies. Each should contain a single main idea or claim, and evidence and analysis to support this claim. Analysis is the taking apart of a whole into its constituent parts. This is why you cannot drop a quote into a paragraph without “taking it apart.” You must show how the evidence is a constituent part. Paragraphs also must synthesize. Synthesis connects to or complicates your main thesis.

*Conclusion—*A conclusion concludes! It does not just summarize, though it probably will to some extent. You synthesize your points into some new whole that reflects your thesis. The important question (as in the IMRAD format) is: What can you now say that you could not have said without everything you’ve written to this point?

**Tips**

* Remember that no two outlines look the same; your outline will be specific to your essay.
* Be open to changes. As you write, your outline may need to shift as you realize logical leaps or contradictions. Don’t lose heart. This happens to everyone.
* You can always **retro-outline** your essay after you have a draft. To retro-outline, simply extricate the components of your essay—your thesis, your topic sentences, your evidence, etc.—and put them into outline form. Does your logic still hold? A retro-outline often reveals a writer’s shaky or poorly-supported claims.
* For information about outlining in specific disciplines, visit the resources tab on the COWS website.