Outlining and Organization

The structure, or organization, of your writing is very important for helping your readers follow your argument. You could find amazing sources, have a great thesis, and be great at writing conclusions, but if your essay doesn't proceed logically from subpoint to subpoint, paragraph to paragraph, your reader—and your message—will just get lost.

The best outlines stem from great working theses, so **it's important before you try to outline your essay that you have some kind of thesis statement in place**. Even if it doesn't end up being the one you stick with (you can always revise any part of your paper later), you need to have a goal, a claim that you are working toward demonstrating as you organize your points.

There are a few types of outline you can try, depending on how much information you're trying to organize. For shorter response papers, the scratch outline might be enough. For longer papers that incorporate research, you'll probably want to go with the complete outline.

Scratch Outline

This type of outline simply lists the basic parts of the paper. It has the advantage of being easy to revise, but the disadvantage of lacking some of the detail that the other types can offer.

Ex: Thesis: Global warming is caused by human activity.
- Greenhouse gas emissions
- Deforestation
- Economics and policies
- Recommendations for change

Note that the order of points here is deliberate: greenhouse gas emissions are caused by several things, but one of them is deforestation, which contributes by making it harder to filter gases from the air. Deforestation is, in turn, exacerbated by government or company policies that place profits over environmental sustainability. These policies are then how we change things, so it makes sense to discuss them right before you make any recommendations for changes, as your recommendations will likely include policy change. However you decide to organize your paper, you need to think about this kind of logic as your organize your information.

Formal Outline

This type is a little more detailed than a scratch outline, offering you places to add details or subpoints where you need to.

Ex: Thesis: Global warming is caused by human activity.
1. Greenhouse gas emissions
   a. Factory output

       b.   Traffic and other transportation
2. Deforestation
       a.   Destruction of wildlife
       b.   Less filtering of CO_2
3. Economics and policies
       a.   Emissions standards
       b.   Lobbying by companies
4. Recommendations for change
       a.   Limits on emissions
       b.   Personal choices to reduce emissions
       c.   Sanctions against deforestation

Complete Outline

A complete outline is the best way to organize your work if you're working with sources, as it allows you to insert quotes and data where appropriate. It does have the disadvantage of being harder to revise if you decide to move things around, because it is usually much bulkier than the scratch or formal outline. However, moving from scratch, to formal, to complete outline, to draft is a simple process if you start from the beginning and do each one thoroughly.

Ex: Thesis: Global warming is caused by human activity.
1. The first major human action that increases global warming is the consistent rise in greenhouse gas emissions.
       a.   Factory output
             i.   "Quote from source #1" (citation)
       b.   Traffic and other transportation
             i.   Jet fuel contributes significantly to greenhouse gases in the atmosphere
                   1.   "Quote from source #2" (citation)
            ii.   Motor vehicles are also a huge source of gases
                   1.   "Quote from source #3" (citation)
          iii.   Lack of public transportation options
                   1.   "Quote from source #3" (citation)
       c.   Et cetera

You can see how if you were to finish out this complete outline to the end of the essay, inserting the actual quotes and citations where indicated, you'd have a pretty decent start on a draft by the time you were done!

Another strategy people often use is called reverse outlining. Some people just prefer to write their draft without an outline, and that's okay! But if this is you, you might try outlining your draft after you write it. Sit down with your printed draft, a piece of paper, and a pen, and make an outline of what you're reading in your draft as you read through it. When you're done, you'll be able to see a short and sweet version of it and more easily spot any places where you need more evidence, where transitions don't make sense, or any other problems.

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Still need help with organizing and outlining?
Make an appointment with the Writing Center!
Library, Room 311/312
www.bradley.edu/writeright

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