Outlining Before You Write

An outline is a organized list of topics, sometimes including subtopics and key points, that provides the skeleton of a paper. An outline is designed to indicate the direction of your paper and can be done before you write as an organizational strategy or after you write as a revision technique. Creating an outline before you begin writing a paper is one way to make sure all your thoughts and arguments get from your brain to the final draft. These steps can help you formulate an outline that should lead to a strong essay.

Organize and prioritize.

Look at what you wrote down while brainstorming or developing your topic (see Handout No. 7, "Topic Development: Writing the Trip of Your Dreams"), then organize each item based on its importance, its relationship to other pieces of information, or its chronological time within a larger framework. After completing this stage, you should have a good idea of exactly what you will discuss in your paper and how you will prove your argument.

Write a working thesis statement.

Before you can outline your paper, you need to know what you are proving in the essay. Writing a thesis statement, however preliminary or unpolished, will give your outline (and therefore your paper) direction and focus. Go back to your brainstorming notes, and think about what you want to discuss, what you've learned from the research, and why your topic is important.

Order the main points.

With your thesis statement in mind, look at your organized notes and decide how to prioritize your thoughts to prove your thesis most effectively. Your supporting evidence should flow logically and smoothly from one point to the next (see Handout No. 11, "Organizing Your Paper: A Few Choice Words").

Organize the detailed arguments.

Now that you have the main points in order, go back to your brainstorming and research notes to decide how to prove each point.

Outlining After You Write

Outlining after you write can help you determine whether or not your argument develops logically and effectively. Try this strategy as a way of evaluating the organization and content of your paper. When outlining your paper, make sure you are true to what you wrote, not to what you intended to write.

- Convert paragraph topic sentences into the main points of your outline.
- Transfer the supporting ideas from your paper to subpoints under your main topics.
- Evaluate the outline. Is it logical, effective, and complete?
- Rearrange paragraphs and ideas. Add or delete information.
- Revise your paper based on your outline.

For more information on creating an formal and informal outline, see:

The New St. Martin's Handbook, pages 57, 44-45, 502
http://webware.Princeton.EDU/Writing/outlines.htm
http://www.wuacc.edu/services/zzcwwctr/org-outline.txt