

CREATING USEFUL OUTLINES

The stage between conducting research and writing an essay – planning – is an important one. Planning will help you to make sense of and organize your material and respond fully and directly to your assignment requirements. It will enable you to present your findings and ideas in a logical manner that will be both persuasive and accessible to your reader.

METHODS OF ORGANIZATION

When you are creating your outline, you can organize your material in one of various ways:

1. **According to the assignment requirements.** Sometimes an assignment question will have several parts that seem to follow a logical order. This order of tasks or sub-questions may be used to create the sections of your essay.

Sample question: “Choose a good that you have purchased and find out where it comes from. Trace out the commodity chain that has enabled this good to come to you. What are all the processes, places, activities, and people involved in the production of “X”? Consider the social implications of your purchase of “X.” How does your purchase contribute to (or detract from) spatial justice in the world?”

The primary tasks in this question suggest that you organize your paper in two main sections: the first describes the commodity chain and the second discusses its social implications. Often in an essay or report, description will precede analysis. The first section might then be divided into the places, people, and activities involved in the process of production. The second might be divided into the positive and negative implications for spatial justice in the world.

2. **According to the thesis statement.** Another way to organize is according to your essay’s thesis statement. Each section or paragraph of the essay should correspond to a component of the thesis statement and should follow the order established in that statement.

Sample thesis statement: “The Canadian Charter protects many rights and freedoms of Canadians. However, the exercise of some of these rights and freedoms is undermined by a limited accessibility to both the political process and higher education.”

Sample topic sentences for this essay:

Section or paragraph #1: “The Charter extends democratic and equality rights to its citizens.”

Section or paragraph #2: “However, democratic rights are undermined by a limited accessibility to the political process.”

Section or paragraph #3: “As well, despite equality rights, many Canadians are disadvantaged by a limited accessibility to higher education.”

Some other methods of organizing the body include *comparison/contrast*, *cause and effect*, moving from *general to specific*, *specific to general*, or toward *increasing complexity*, and *chronological development*.

THE FORMAL OUTLINE

An outline should be a single-page display of the line of thinking your essay will develop. The relationships between the thesis statement, main points, and subordinate points are made clear.

Thesis Statement:

I. First supporting point

1. main idea
 - a. example/evidence
 - b. example/evidence

II. Second supporting point

1. main idea
 - a. example/evidence
 - b. example/evidence
2. main idea
 - a. example/evidence
 - b.
 - c.

This handout uses material from *Thinking it Through: A Practical Guide to Academic Essay Writing* (3rd ed.) by Martin Boyne, Mary Ann Armstrong, and Maged El Komos (Academic Skills Centre, Trent University).