



STRATEGIES FOR OUTLINING YOUR SCHOLARLY PAPER¹

© 2014 The Writing Center at GULC. All rights reserved.

Outlining is more than just another box to check off in the writing process. An outline is the master plan for your scholarly paper; it pulls together a broad array of sources and ideas into a coherent framework organized to support your thesis. You are likely to encounter an overwhelming body of literature on a topic that interests you, but in moving from that topic to a strong scholarly paper it is critical to craft a compelling thesis and structure the paper to support that thesis. This is the role of an outline – organizing your research to effectively support your thesis.

What does an outline look like?

Use different outlines for different purposes. Outlines can be long, detailed notes that document the progression the paper will take. They can also be brief, bullet-points that include only the main points of the paper. An early outline may only include your main points, and become more detailed as additional research allows you to fill out your analysis and the sources that support each argument. A rough outline is the first step toward a more detailed annotated outline. Start early, and do not try to jump straight into a more detailed outline.

Organize your outline around issues, arguments, and analysis – not sources.

There is a difference between an outline and research notes. While you should take notes on each source you read, these notes are not an outline. An outline integrates information from a variety of sources and organizes it to support your thesis. In the same way that legal analysis in a brief or memo should not be organized around discussions of cases – but rather use those cases to support an assertion – a scholarly paper should be organized around arguments and issues supported by a range of authority.

Start outlining before you even begin researching.

What is your topic? Have you crafted a thesis yet, or do you need to do additional background research first? As you move from brainstorming to research, jot down issues, potential search terms, possible arguments, and related points you may want to explore later. Capturing these ideas – and how they relate to each other – is the beginning of an outline for your paper and will help guide your research by identifying elements or issues that you need to look into further.

Continue to outline while researching.

Keep track of your research. You do not want to be wasting time going back through sources you already read. Keeping good notes and working on your outline while you research also helps you see how issues relate to each other and how authority can be used to support your

¹ Written by Peter Carey. A previous version of this handout was written by Colin Huntley and Mindy Barry.

points on those issues. This process helps refine how you want to address the issues and identify gaps in your research. And while you are at it, keep track of your sources and citations as you go to save time later for revising rather than tracking down citations.

When you think you are finished researching, step back and take a look at your outline.

With all of your research fresh in your mind, is there anything missing? Are there any significant arguments or points you might have overlooked? Just as important, is there anything in your outline that is not necessary to support your thesis? After countless hours of research, it is easy for unnecessary background information or analysis of tangential issues to make its way into a scholarly paper and detract from your core analysis. Once you settle on the appropriate issues to include, apply your newfound expertise on the topic to consider the most effective way of ordering and organizing the analysis of these issues.

Your arguments are organized, now add your sources.

Once you outline the issues and points you want to make, there is a temptation to simply lump in the sources where they fit. But putting extra effort in at this stage will pay off when you write your first draft. A sophisticated writer will not simply outline the issues, but will incorporate sources into an annotated outline. An annotated outline is generally written using full sentences to articulate your analysis rather than only listing the points you plan to analyze. The annotated outline supports this analysis by not simply listing sources that must be addressed for this point, but including the relevant facts, analysis, and conclusions from these sources to support your thesis.

Revise, revise, revise.

Revision should not be reserved for the end of the writing process. Writing an outline is not a discrete task in the writing process that can be forgotten once it is completed. As you write your paper, you will uncover other issues that you did not notice before. Perhaps it is a counterargument that needs to be addressed, or a point that could use additional background to add context for the reader. Continuously revising your outline will lead to a stronger paper by identifying gaps in your analysis that need to be addressed while at the same time screening out points that seemed interesting when you were researching but are unnecessary and do not clearly fit in the structure of your analysis.

Find what works for you.

This handout provides outlining strategies, but what is most important is that you find a writing process that works for you. Some writers spend minimal time outlining but devote more time to a first draft. Others outline extensively, including full sentences that will actually be used in their final paper. There is no single “right” approach. Outlining is an important process for many writers, but experiment and find what works best for you.