

Organizing an Essay

Some basic guidelines

The best time to think about how to organize your paper is during the pre-writing stage, not the writing or revising stage. A well-thought-out plan can save you from having to do a lot of reorganizing when the first draft is completed. Moreover, it allows you to pay more attention to sentence-level issues when you sit down to write your paper.

When you begin planning, ask the following questions: What type of essay am I going to be writing? Does it belong to a specific genre? In university, you may be asked to write, say, a book review, a lab report, a document study, or a compare-and-contrast essay. Knowing the patterns of reasoning associated with a genre can help you to structure your essay.

For example, book reviews typically begin with a summary of the book you're reviewing. They then often move on to a critical discussion of the book's strengths and weaknesses. They may conclude with an overall assessment of the value of the book. These typical features of a book review lead you to consider dividing your outline into three parts: (1) summary; (2) discussion of strengths and weaknesses; (3) overall evaluation. The second and most substantial part will likely break down into two sub-parts. It is up to you to decide the order of the two subparts—whether to analyze strengths or weaknesses first. And of course it will be up to you to come up with actual strengths and weaknesses.

Be aware that genres are not fixed. Different professors will define the features of a genre differently. Read the assignment question carefully for guidance.

Understanding genre can take you only so far. Most university essays are argumentative, and there is no set pattern for the shape of an argumentative essay. The simple three-point essay taught in high school is far too restrictive for the complexities of most university assignments. You must be ready to come up with whatever essay structure helps you to convince your reader of the validity of your position. In other words, you must be flexible, and you must rely on your wits. Each essay presents a fresh problem.

Avoiding a common pitfall

Though there are no easy formulas for generating an outline, you can avoid one of the most common pitfalls in student papers by remembering this simple principle: the structure of an essay should not be determined by the structure of its source material. For example, an essay on an historical period should not necessarily follow the chronology of events from that period. Similarly, a well-constructed essay about a literary work does not usually progress in parallel with the plot. Your obligation is to advance your argument, not to reproduce the plot.

If your essay is not well structured, then its overall weaknesses will show through in the individual paragraphs. Consider the following two paragraphs from two different English essays, both arguing that despite Hamlet's highly developed moral nature he becomes morally compromised in the course of the play:

(a) In Act 3, Scene 4, Polonius hides behind an arras in Gertrude's chamber in order to spy on Hamlet at the bidding of the king. Detecting something stirring, Hamlet draws his sword and kills Polonius, thinking he has killed Claudius. Gertrude exclaims, "O, what a rash and bloody deed is this!" (28), and her words mark the turning point in Hamlet's moral decline. Now Hamlet has blood on his hands, and the blood of the wrong person. But rather than engage in self-criticism, Hamlet immediately turns his mother's words against her: "A bloody deed – almost as bad, good Mother, as kill a king, and marry with his brother" (29-30). One of Hamlet's most serious shortcomings is his unfair treatment of women. He often accuses them of sins they could not have committed. It is doubtful that Gertrude even knows Claudius killed her previous husband. Hamlet goes on to ask Gertrude to compare the image of the two kings, old Hamlet and Claudius. In Hamlet's words, old Hamlet has "Hyperion's curls," the front of Jove," and "an eye like Mars" (57-58). Despite Hamlet's unfair treatment of women, he is motivated by one of his better qualities: his idealism.

(b) One of Hamlet's most serious moral shortcomings is his unfair treatment of women. In Act 3, Scene 1, he denies to Ophelia ever having expressed his love for her, using his feigned madness as cover for his cruelty. Though his rantings may be an act, they cannot hide his obsessive anger at one particular woman: his mother. He counsels Ophelia to "marry a fool, for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them" (139-41), thus blaming her in advance for the sin of adultery. The logic is plain: if Hamlet's mother made a cuckold out of Hamlet's father, then all women are capable of doing the same and therefore share the blame. The fact that Gertrude's hasty remarriage does not actually constitute adultery only underscores Hamlet's tendency to find in women faults that do not exist. In Act 3, Scene 4, he goes as far as to suggest that Gertrude shared responsibility in the murder of Hamlet's father (29-30). By condemning women for actions they did not commit, Hamlet is doing just what he accuses Guildenstern of doing to him: he is plucking out the "heart" of their "mystery" (3.2.372-74).

The second of these two paragraphs is much stronger, largely because it is not plot-driven. It makes a well-defined point about Hamlet's moral nature and sticks to that point throughout the paragraph. Notice that the paragraph jumps from one scene to another as is necessary, but the logic of the argument moves along a steady path. At any given point in your essays, you will want to leave yourself free to go wherever you need to in your source material. Your only obligation is to further your argument. Paragraph (a) sticks closely to the narrative thread of Act 3, Scene 4, and as a result the paragraph makes several different points with no clear focus.

What does an essay outline look like?

Most essay outlines will never be handed in. They are meant to serve you and no one else. Occasionally, your professor will ask you to hand in an outline weeks prior to handing in your paper. Usually, the point is to ensure that you are on the right track. Nevertheless, when you produce your outline, you should follow certain basic principles. Here is an example of an outline for an essay on *Hamlet*:

- thesis: Despite Hamlet's highly developed moral nature, he becomes morally compromised while delaying his revenge.
- I. Introduction: Hamlet's father asks Hamlet not only to seek vengeance but also to keep his mind untainted.
 - II. Hamlet has a highly developed moral nature.
 - A. Hamlet is idealistic.
 - B. Hamlet is aware of his own faults, whereas others are self-satisfied.
 - C. Hamlet does not want to take revenge without grounds for acting.
 - III. Hamlet becomes morally compromised while delaying.
 - A. The turning point in Hamlet's moral decline is his killing of Polonius.
 - B. Hamlet's moral decline continues when he sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their death.
 - C. Hamlet already began his moral decline before the turning point in the play, the killing of Polonius.
 1. Hamlet treats women badly.
 2. Hamlet criticizes others in the play for acting falsely to get ahead, but in adopting the disguise of madness he, too, is presenting a false face to the world.
 - IV. Though Hamlet becomes more compromised the longer he delays, killing the king would have been a morally questionable act.
 - V. Conclusion: The play *Hamlet* questions the adequacy of a system of ethics based on honour and revenge.

This is an example of a sentence outline. Another kind of outline is the topic outline. It consists of fragments rather than full sentences. Topic outlines are more open-ended than sentence outlines: they leave much of the working out of the argument for the writing stage.

When should I begin putting together a plan?

The earlier you begin planning, the better. It is usually a mistake to do all of your research and note-taking before beginning to draw up an outline. Of course, you will have to do some

reading and weighing of evidence before you start to plan. But as a potential argument begins to take shape in your mind, you may start to formalize your thoughts in the form of a tentative plan. You will be much more efficient in your reading and your research if you have some idea of where your argument is headed. You can then search for evidence for the points in your tentative plan while you are reading and researching. As you gather evidence, those points that still lack evidence should guide you in your research. Remember, though, that your plan may need to be modified as you critically evaluate your evidence.

How can I construct a usable plan?

Here are two methods for constructing a plan. The first works best on the computer. The second method works well for those who think visually. It is often the method of choice for those who prefer to do some of their thinking with pen and paper, though it can easily be transposed to a word processor or your graphic software of choice.

method 1: hierarchical outline

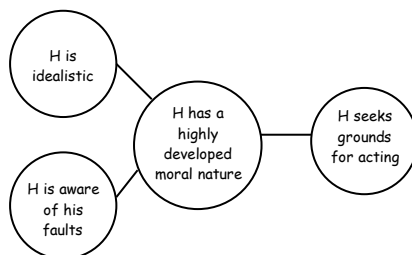
This method usually begins by taking notes. Start by collecting potential points, as well as useful quotations and paraphrases of quotations, consecutively. As you accumulate notes, identify key points and start to arrange those key points into an outline. To build your outline, take advantage of outline view in Word or numbered lists in Google Docs. Or consider one of the specialized apps designed to help organize ideas: Scrivener, Microsoft OneNote, Workflowy, among others. All these tools make it easy for you to arrange your points hierarchically and to move those points around as you refine your plan.

You may, at least initially, keep your notes and your outline separate. But there is no reason for you not to integrate your notes into the plan. Your notes—minor points, quotations, and paraphrases—can all be interwoven into the plan, just below the main points they support. Some of your notes may not find a place in your outline. If so, either modify the plan or leave those points out.

method 2: circle diagram

This method is designed to get your key ideas onto a single page, where you can see them all at once. When you have an idea, write it down, and draw a circle around it. When you have an idea that supports another idea, do the same, but connect the two circles with a line. Supporting source material can be represented concisely by a page reference inside a circle. The advantage of the circle method is that you can see at a glance how things tie together; the disadvantage is that there is a limit to how much material you can cram onto a page.

Here is part of a circle diagram:



Once you are content with your diagram, you have the option of turning it into an essay outline.

What is a reverse outline?

When you have completed your first draft, and you think your paper can be better organized, consider using a reverse outline. Reverse outlines are simple to create. Just read through your essay, and every time you make a new point, summarize it in the margin. If the essay is reasonably well-organized, you should have one point in the margin for each paragraph, and your points read out in order should form a coherent argument. You might, however, discover that some of your points are repeated at various places in your essay. Other points may be out of place, and still other key points may not appear at all. Think of all these points as the ingredients of an improved outline which you now must create. Use this new outline to cut and paste the sentences into a revised version of your essay, consolidating points that appear in several parts of your essay while eliminating repetition and creating smooth transitions where necessary.

You can improve even the most carefully planned essay by creating a reverse outline after completing your first draft. The process of revision should be as much about organization as it is about style.

How much of my time should I put into planning?

It is self-evident that a well-planned paper is going to be better organized than a paper that was not planned out. Thinking carefully about how you are going to argue your paper and preparing an outline can only add to the quality of your final product. Nevertheless, some people find it more helpful than others to plan. Those who are good at coming up with ideas but find writing difficult often benefit from planning. By contrast, those who have trouble generating ideas but find writing easy may benefit from starting to write early. Putting pen to paper (or typing away at the keyboard) may be just what is needed to get the ideas to flow.

You have to find out for yourself what works best for you, though it is fair to say that at least some planning is always a good idea. Think about whether your current practices are serving you well. You know you're planning too little if the first draft of your essays is always a disorganized mess, and you have to spend a disproportionate amount of time creating reverse outlines and cutting and pasting material. You know you're planning too much if you always find yourself writing your paper a day before it's due after spending weeks doing research and devising elaborate plans.

Be aware of the implications of planning too little or too much.

Planning provides the following **advantages**:

- helps you to produce a **logical** and **orderly** argument that your readers can follow
- helps you to produce an **economical** paper by allowing you to spot repetition
- helps you to produce a **thorough** paper by making it easier for you to notice whether you have left anything out
- makes drafting the paper easier by allowing you to concentrate on writing issues such as grammar, word choice, and clarity

Overplanning poses the following **risks**:

- doesn't leave you enough time to write and revise
- leads you to produce papers that try to cover too much ground at the expense of analytic depth
- can result in a writing style that lacks spontaneity and ease
- does not provide enough opportunity to discover new ideas in the process of writing