



WRITING CENTER

Library and Academic Resource Center (LARC 229)
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Figure 1 Logos for the Academic Resource Center and The Writing Center

How to Make an Outline

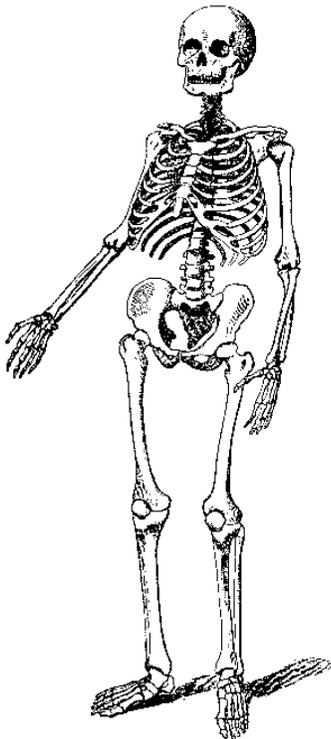


Figure 2 An image of a skeleton

What is an outline?

- An outline is the skeleton of an essay. It tells you what the essay is going to be about and how it will cover the topic, but it is still missing the “flesh,” the details and sentences that make up the essay.

What is the purpose of an outline?

- Doing an outline will simplify and speed up writing/drafting your essay. Your ideas will already be gathered and loosely arranged in the outline, so an important pre-writing step for your essay will have been completed.
- An outline will help you visually organize your ideas. It puts your ideas in a logical order that someone else will be able to understand and follow. This prevents your ideas from becoming mixed up/unorganized (the ideas in your body paragraphs will be kept separate—one idea for one body paragraph).

What to do before starting the outline?

- Brainstorm your ideas to figure out what the topic of your paper will be, as well as what you have to say about that topic.
See our handout on **The Writing Process to find brainstorming techniques such as clustering, listing, free writing, etc.*

How to start the outline?

- Figure out what your thesis statement/sentence will be. The Thesis is the main idea of your essay. Everything else in the outline is going to support the thesis. Make sure the thesis is stating something that you can prove and support with details.
 - *Example:* The legal drinking age should be lowered to 18.

What to do after you write the thesis statement?

- Find a way to categorize/separate your supporting ideas of the thesis. In a standard five-paragraph essay, you should come up with 3 supporting points. These points are often added to the thesis statement.
 - *Example:* The legal drinking age should be lowered to 18 because a.) drinking will become less taboo and less tempting to young people, b.) 18 is the age when young people are given many other privileges/responsibilities, and c.) most other European/Asian/Africa/etc. nations have the drinking age set to 18.

What to do after you think of your supporting points?

- Think of what evidence/information you are going to use to back up/support the main points that support the thesis.
 - *Example:* For the second supporting idea, “18 is the age when young people are given many other privileges/responsibilities,” you could explain that 18 year olds have the responsibility to vote, go to war, and be prosecuted as adults in a court of law.

Now how do you put these points and evidence down on paper?

- Start by putting the thesis statement/sentence at the top of the page. This will later go into your introduction.
- Next, label your three main supporting ideas with Roman numerals (I, II, III) in a vertical row. Each Roman numeral should be parallel. These will later be your topic sentences in your body.
 - *Example:*

[SAMPLE OUTLINE]

Thesis: The legal drinking age should be lowered to 18 because drinking will become less taboo and less tempting to young people, 18 is the age when young people are given many other privileges/responsibilities, and most other European/Asian/Africa/American nations have the drinking age set to 18.

I. Drinking will become less taboo and less tempting to young people.

II. 18 is the age when young people are given many other privileges/responsibilities.

III. Most other European/Asian/Africa/etc. nations have the drinking age set to 18.

Now how do you include the evidence/support for your main points?

- Use capital letters in the outline to indicate your evidence, or the ideas that prove your main supporting points. Indent the letters so that they align with each other and not the Roman numerals.

- *Example:*

[SAMPLE OUTLINE]

Thesis: The legal drinking age should be lowered to 18 because drinking will become less taboo and less tempting to young people, 18 is the age when young people are given many other privileges/responsibilities, and most other European/Asian/Africa/ nations have the drinking age set to 18.

- I. Drinking will become less taboo and less tempting to young people.
 - A. They will grow up with it around, never seeing drinking as a mystery.
 - B. Young people under the age of 21 will no-longer sneak to buy/drink alcohol.
 - C. The amount of fatalities due to drinking will be reduced among college students, as the thrill and novelty of drinking will no longer exist.

- II. Eighteen is the age when young people are given many other privileges/responsibilities.
 - A. They can vote in elections.
 - B. They can go to war and join the army.
 - C. They can be tried in a court of law as adults and not minors.

- III. Most other European/Asian/African/etc. nations have the drinking age set to 18.
 - A. Many countries like Greece and Italy have no legal drinking age at all.
 - B. Besides Paraguay, the United States is the only country in the Americas that has the legal drinking age set as high as 21.
 - C. We need to follow the example set by other nations.

What if the supporting evidence includes more information/subcategories?

- Use regular numbers (Arabic numbers) for any subdivisions of your evidence. Indent these numbers so they align with each other and not the Roman numerals or the capitalized letters.
- Subdivisions should always be presented in pairs.
 - *Example:*

[SAMPLE OUTLINE]

- I. Most other European/Asian/Africa/etc. nations have the drinking age set to 18.
 - A. Many countries like Greece and Italy have no legal drinking age at all.
 1. They only set an age limit for purchasing alcohol.
 2. To drink if you are under the purchasing age is the decision of the parents.
 - a. Parents may/may not provide the opportunity to drink alcohol.
 - b. Parents take responsibility for monitoring their children's drinking.
 - B. Besides Paraguay, The United States is the only country in the Americas that has the legal drinking age set as high as 21.
 1. This even includes Canada, whose drinking age is 19.
 2. In Mexico, the legal drinking age is 18.
 - C. We need to follow the example set by other nations.

1. The rate of alcoholism for citizens in other nations is lower than that of the US.
2. The rate of alcohol related incidents is lower in other nations than in the US.

Should you write in complete sentences?

- You can write in complete sentences or in words/phrases
 - A **Topic Outline** uses words/phrases that help you remember what idea is going to go where.
 - A **Sentence Outline** uses complete sentences to tell what idea will go where. (We have been using a Sentence Outline as our example).

Keep in Mind...

- You may decide to reorganize your ideas by putting them in a different order or to change your supporting ideas/evidence along the way, but this is normal.
- If while drafting/writing the essay you decide to deviate from the outline a little, that is okay, as the outline is just a rough skeleton of the essay and can be changed at any point.
- You can also include the introduction and conclusion paragraphs in the outline if you want—give those paragraphs separate Roman numeral headings, as well as capital letter and Arabic number subheadings for supporting ideas.
- Make the outline fit your own needs.

Exercise

Write a thesis and outline for yourself! Answer the question, “Is it better to be single or married?” Use the **Topic Outline** method. Then, see if you can develop your outline into a **Sentence Outline** by expanding the words/phrases into complete sentences.

[*SAMPLE OUTLINE*]

Thesis: The legal drinking age should be lowered to 18 because drinking will become less taboo and less tempting to young people, 18 is the age when young people are given many other privileges/responsibilities, and most other European/Asian/Africa/ nations have the drinking age set to 18.

I. Drinking will become less taboo and less tempting to young people.

A. They will grow up with it around, never seeing drinking as a mystery.

B. Young people under the age of 21 will no-longer sneak to buy/drink alcohol.

C. The amount of fatalities due to drinking will be reduced among college students, as the thrill and novelty of drinking will no longer exist.

II. Eighteen is the age when young people are given many other privileges/responsibilities.

A. They can vote in elections.

- B. They can go to war and join the army.
 - C. They can be tried in a court of law as adults and not minors.
- III. Most other European/Asian/Africa/etc. nations have the drinking age set to 18.
- A. Many countries like Greece and Italy have no legal drinking age at all.
 - 1. They only set an age limit for purchasing alcohol.
 - 2. To drink if you are under the purchasing age is the decision of the parents.
 - a. Parents may/may not provide the opportunity to drink alcohol.
 - b. Parents take responsibility for monitoring their children's drinking.
 - B. Besides Paraguay, The United States is the only country in the Americas that has the legal drinking age set as high as 21.
 - 1. This even includes Canada, whose drinking age is 19.
 - 2. In Mexico, the legal drinking age is 18.
 - C. We need to follow the example set by other nations.
 - 1. The rate of alcoholism for citizens in other nations is lower than that of the US.
 - 2. The rate of alcohol related incidents is lower in other nations than in the US.

Use the detachable essay outline template on the next pages to help you with essay you work on.

Essay Outline Template

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background Information

1. General background information that grabs attention (reference)

2. More specific background information to lead into the thesis

B. Thesis statement

1. Topic Sentence

2. Outline your key points (Include Body Paragraphs II, III, & III)

II. BODY

A. Support Paragraph # 1

1. Topic Sentence (Includes supporting ideas)

2. Supporting Ideas

- a. Reason/Detail/Fact and transition

b. More information and transition (reference)

c. Analysis of evidence

3. Summarizing/Concluding/Transition sentence

B. Support Paragraph # 2

1. Topic sentence (Includes supporting ideas)

2. Supporting ideas

a. Reason/Detail/Fact and transition

b. More information and transition (reference)

c. Analysis of evidence

3. Summarizing/Concluding/Transition sentence

C. Support Paragraph #3

1. Topic Sentence (Includes supporting ideas)

2. Supporting ideas

a. Reason/Detail/Fact and transition

b. More information and transition (reference)

c. Analysis of evidence

3. Summarizing/Concluding/Transition sentence

D. Maybe even another Support Paragraph # 4 (or more)

1. Topic Sentence (Includes supporting ideas)

2. Supporting ideas

a. Reason/Detail/Fact and transition

b. More information and transition (reference)

c. Analysis of evidence

3. Summarizing/Concluding/Transition sentence

III. CONCLUSION

A. Summarize/Review key points

B. Concluding thought

This Handout is based on the following texts:

Cushman, Marion. "How to Write an Outline." Los Angeles Valley College Library. 22 Jan. 2001. Jan 2009
<<http://www.lavc.edu/Library/outline.htm>>.

Hacker, Diana. *A Writer's Reference*. 4th ed. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's., 1999.

Purdue OWL. "Developing an Outline." *The OWL at Purdue*. 13 Nov. 2008. Jan. 2009
<<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/544/01/>>.

"Essay Outline Template". Soph Writing nncu. Wikispaces.com Web. 13 June 2013.

Please visit our website at www.lavc.edu/WCweb/index.html for additional resources and services

Please visit lavc.edu/writingcenter for more handouts.