Creating an Outline Study Sheet

Goals of this Study Sheet
This study sheet will cover the importance of creating an outline before writing a paper, as well as how to create the most effective outline. The beginning processes of writing a paper are often the most important. How you begin will determine the ease of the process moving forward. If you want to have a strong start to your writing, read over this study sheet, and follow the suggestions to begin your paper with an outline.

Why Outlines Are Important
Instead of detailing all the wonderful reasons why you should create an outline, the following sections will instead go over all the awful things that can happen when you don’t.

Here are a few problems you can have if you don’t create an outline:

Being Crippled by a Blank Page
Have you ever begun writing a paper, sat down in front of a blank piece of paper, and not known how to start? The idea of beginning to type words on a blank page can be daunting, and sometimes will cripple writers, causing them to have writer’s block or long bouts of procrastination. Beginning with an outline can help alleviate the fear and frustration of beginning the large task of writing a paper. Using an outline to start your writing process breaks writing down into manageable chunks, and gives a visible picture of how you can move forward.

Losing Your Way
Have you ever gotten to the end of writing your paper, then went back to read it over and realized that your ideas are all over the place and don’t make sense at all? This is another issue that can come up when writers don’t use outlines. If you write your entire paper without any guidance to keep you on track, you are likely to get lost on rabbit trails, or not organize your thoughts in a logical manner. An outline will act as a roadmap to keep you on the right track as you write you paper. If you create a detailed
Having Trouble Transitioning

A resulting issue of losing your way when not using an outline is awkward transitions. For example, let’s say I’m writing a paper on how to make a cake. I didn’t make an outline, so I’ve jumped right in to describing the process of mixing all of my ingredients together. After that, I realized that I still need to talk about how to acquire and measure out all of the ingredients. My transition from mixing the ingredients to acquiring them ends up being very clunky and awkward. Why? Because they don’t follow a logical thought process. You need to have ingredients before you can mix them together. While this is a very simplistic example, the same thing can happen with more complex topics. Having an outline that logically organizes the sections of your paper before you write it out sets you up to be successful with your transitions.

How to Create and Use an Effective Outline

Hopefully now you should understand why creating an outline for your paper before you begin to write is such a helpful starting place. The following steps will help you create an effective outline that will assist you in staying on track when writing your paper:

1. Establish Your Topic

When you begin to organize your paper, you need to start by writing out your topic. It is sometimes helpful to pose your topic as a question you are answering with your paper. For example, if I am writing an argument paper about why we should provide funding for space exploration, I might want to phrase my topic like so: “Do the benefits of space exploration outweigh the cost it would take to conduct them?” When I phrase my topic as a question like this, it makes it easier for me to understand the point of my paper (which is to answer the question).

2. Create a Working Thesis

The next step is to establish a working thesis. Your thesis is essentially the purpose statement of your paper. It may mention each of the sections of your topic that you will cover, or it may be a more generalized statement that answers the question you posed.
when you wrote out your topic. Keep in mind that all you need to get started is a working thesis. This just means a rough draft of your thesis. Depending on how you progress with your writing, you may need to come back and revise your thesis. Your first attempt at a thesis is hardly ever what you will end up with at the end of your writing, so don’t feel as though you are obligated to stick with your original and never change it.

3. Break Your Topic Into Main Ideas/Sections
Once you’ve established your thesis, you need to determine the areas that your paper will cover in order to prove/back-up your thesis. Breaking up your topic into main ideas is crucial, as you need to know specifically what you will be covering in your paper, as well as in what order you will discuss those different ideas. For example, if my thesis for my space paper argues that space exploration is worth the cost, I might want to detail all the costs involved, as well as all the benefits that would be gained. With shorter papers, these large/overarching sections will be the body paragraphs of your paper. If my space exploration paper is only four paragraphs long, then I will probably only have one paragraph for costs and one paragraph for benefits. Whether these main sections end up being only single paragraphs, or sections that contain multiple paragraphs, you need to determine what those sections will be, and stay on track with them when you write your paper.

4. Determine if You Need Subtopics
In larger papers, your main sections will probably need to be divided up further into subtopics. After you determine the larger sections of your paper, find the specifics within those sections that you want to cover. A paragraph needs to have only one topic that it covers, so make sure that you are breaking down your main topics into as many subtopics as necessary.

5. Either Use Your Outline as a Map or as a Skeleton
Once your outline is complete, there are two ways you can use it: either as a map or as a skeleton. The map method is the simpler of the two. When you use the outline as a map, you would simply keep the outline with you to follow as you write out your essay. The outline would serve as a reference point for you to refer back to when you want to know what to write about next. The skeleton method is more detailed, and arguably more helpful. When you use your outline as a skeleton, you will actually write you essay
in your outline. (If this is a method that interests you, consider using our Skeleton Method Outline Template in the Body Paragraphs section to build your paper skeleton.) For example, in my space paper, I’ve determined that one of my large sections will be the benefits of space exploration, and under that, one of my subtopics is the benefit of the expansion of territory. Within my outline, under that subtopic, I will write out my whole paragraph on the benefit of expanded territory. I will continue to do that for each one of my subtopics. If you follow this method, all you need to do is fill in the pieces on your outline to have a completed paper. Once finished with writing out each paragraph, you may need to go back and smooth out transitions, but for the most part, the meat of your paper will be completed. If you want to read more about how this Skeleton Method works, check out the section on Body Paragraphs.

**In Conclusion**

Now you know some of the benefits of using an outline, as well as the process to go about creating one. If you follow these steps, staying organized and on track when writing should be a lot easier. Please see the suggested resources below for more assistance as you continue to build your paper.

**Other Resources**

Feel free to use our “Outline Template” to build your own outline

Also check out our “Reverse Outlining” study sheet, which can help with making sure you stuck to your original outline

Check out our “Building Body Paragraphs” study sheet and activity sheet to get more details on the Skeleton Method

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