

# INTRODUCTION TO OUTLINES

## The Writing Process

ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC SUPPORT



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### OUTLINING:

An **outline** is a loose framework of an essay that helps to guide your writing. An outline will highlight the most important points that your essay will cover without going into full detail.

It is very difficult to start writing an essay without a good idea of how you will structure it. Without a proper outline, it can become easy to stray off course from your topic or, contrastingly, to lose steam and become unsure of how to continue.

Outlining allows writers to narrow down and organize their ideas before they start writing their actual essay. Such organization can help you stay on track as you progress through the writing process.



### MAKING USE OF PREWRITING:

Outlining offers the perfect way to make the most of any prewriting that you may have completed on your essay topic.

After completing a few prewriting activities, you may be unsure of what to do with all the ideas you generated. It may even feel as though you have too many ideas to work with.

Outlining allows you to take the broad ideas you generated from prewriting strategies and refine and focus them into usable material for your essay.

**Note:** For more information about prewriting, see the **Brainstorming Strategies** handout.

### FINDING YOUR OWN PROCESS:

As with the process of brainstorming, outlining is a process that is unique for each writer. There is not a single correct way to draft an outline and it may take you several tries to find what works best for you.

Even for experienced writers, the process of outlining is often different for each piece of writing. Outlining is a bit like a puzzle—you have to figure out how each piece of your essay will fit together to make up the larger picture. It may take some time to arrange everything properly, but that is how the process works.

### TENTATIVE OUTLINE:

Before drafting a finalized **formal outline**, it is useful to first draft a very **tentative** or **loose outline**.

When drafting a tentative outline, you do not need to worry about what you want to say first. Instead of trying to fit your ideas into a logical and convincing order right away, it is a good idea to assess the material you are working with by outlining each of your potential supporting ideas individually.

Doing so will make it easier to evaluate and arrange your supports when you eventually move onto drafting a formal outline.

### DRAFTING A TENTATIVE OUTLINE:

To create a tentative outline, begin by organizing your ideas into broad categories.

Add subheadings to each topic to organize the finer points of each broad support and then expand on each idea by providing extra details and examples under those subheadings. You can number your supports if it helps.

**Tip:** You can try writing each topic on a separate sheet of paper or typing them in separate documents so they will be easier to compare and arrange later.

From the previous prewriting activities concerning the advantages of in-person learning, the following tentative outline could be constructed:

**Learning Environment:**

1. The classroom is a focused learning environment
  - o Ex: Fewer distractions than there are at home
2. More stimulating environment in person
  - o Ex: Learning at home can be monotonous
  - o Ex: Change of scenery on campus
3. Fewer technical difficulties
  - o Ex: No problems with connectivity in person
  - o Ex: Don't have to worry about poor audio/background noise
4. It's easier to ask questions
  - o Ex: No delays turning on microphones/taking time to type questions out in the chat

**Social Benefits:**

1. Social interaction can improve mental health
  - o Ex: Easier to make new friends
  - o Ex: Can develop a support system for studying
2. More social interaction in person
  - o Ex: Learning from home can be lonely
  - o Ex: Seeing people face-to-face is more personal → more connected
3. More memorable school experience on-campus
  - o Ex: There are a lot of cool things to do on campus, like club events and activities

**Physical Health Benefits:**

- Ex: Less screen time = better for your eyes
- Ex: More opportunities for fresh air
- Ex: Less sedentary (walking around campus)



**Counterarguments:**

1. Technology has a lot of benefits
  - o Ex: The chance to post questions/comments in the chat can be really convenient
  - o Ex: The ability to rewatch/rewind is great if you missed something
2. Online learning is more convenient.
  - o Ex: It's easier to make it to class when the weather is bad
  - o Ex: You don't have to miss class if you are not feeling well enough to come to school
  - o Ex: Don't have to worry about transportation/parking
  - o Ex: Online learning can be really convenient for people who live far away.
3. Online learning is more flexible
  - o Ex: Chance to work at your own pace

From here, you can start to root out any ideas that do not fit in with your arguments. You can also determine which topics are strong enough to function as body paragraphs.

In this example, the topic "Physical Health Benefits" only has three small, or specific, examples to support it.

Therefore, it probably would not be strong enough to stand on its own as its own paragraph. However, it could be combined with another idea to form an effective argument.

Once you have decided which topics will serve as your main arguments, you can start to think about how best to order those topics.



## FORMAL OUTLINE:

The formal outline is where you will begin to really piece together your essay. The goal of creating a formal outline is to establish a framework that you can follow when you begin writing your essay.

Now is the time to determine how to order your arguments most effectively. As you will see below, the sections of your formal outline might differ from the sections you created in your tentative outline.

In a formal outline, you should start to phrase your arguments in more formal language as you would phrase them in your final essay (i.e., using only the third person; eliminating conversational language, shorthand, and contractions).

You should also start to think about how you will transition from one idea to the next so that your supports will not seem choppy.

**Tip:** Creating an outline is not a linear process. You will probably have to re-examine/restart the process as you go along, rearranging your ideas until they are in the most logical order. The important thing is to find what order makes the most sense and flows the most naturally to you.

**Note:** The number of body paragraphs/supports you need depends on the requirements of the essay you are writing.

**Note:** For more information about what each part of your essay should include, see the following handouts:

**The Introduction Paragraph, Paragraph Development, and The Conclusion Paragraph**

Continuing with the example of in-person learning, this formal outline could be drafted:

### Introduction:

**Opening statements:** The face of education has been transformed in the past decade. Technology makes it possible to receive education completely online.

There are many things to consider when comparing online and in-person learning.

**Thesis:** Although there are numerous benefits to online learning, in-person learning offers students a more valuable learning experience.

### Body Paragraph #1:

**Topic sentence:** In-person learning is more engaging than online learning

**Counterpoint:** Technology has a lot of benefits

Example: The chance to post questions/comments in the chat can be convenient

Example: The ability to rewatch/rewind is great if you missed something

**Transition:** However, technological advantages do not make up for the lesser working environments at home

**Support #1:** In-person learning offers a designated learning environment with fewer distractions

Example: No technical difficulties in person

Example: Classrooms are focused learning environments (no distractions from family, pets, TV etc.)

**Support #2:** In-person learning is more stimulating

Example: Face-to-face conversation makes it easier to engage with fellow students and teachers

Example: Change of scenery can be refreshing → helps keep students attentive

**Note:** Some examples in the tentative outline were rearranged to support different ideas in the formal outline based on where they fit best. For example, the supports under the “Counterarguments” topic were split up to counterbalance the main supports in each of the body paragraphs.



**Note:** You may not use all of the material that you prepared for your prewriting/tentative outline in your formal outline and final essay.

You should be conscious of the word requirement of your assignment when you are compiling your formal outline. You need to leave room to expand on each idea and provide adequate transitions.

### FROM OUTLINE TO ESSAY:

After completing your outline, it should hopefully be easier to move onto your final essay. With a clear guide of what your essay will include in front of you, the task of writing should feel more straightforward.

It is important to remember however, that although the outline is a great guide, you should not become too glued to it. The structure of your essay may still change as you begin to write. If something about your outline is not working, try a new approach. Writing is all about trial and error.

**Sources:** (MLA 8<sup>th</sup> Edition)

Hay, Iain, et al. *Making the Grade: A Guide to Study and Success, Canadian Edition*. Oxford University Press, 2012

Reinking, James. A, et al. *Strategies for Successful Writing: A Rhetoric, Research Guide, Reader, and Handbook, Sixth Canadian Edition*. Pearson Canada Inc, 2017

**Body Paragraph #2:**

**Topic sentence:** In-person learning can help improve physical and mental health

**Counterpoint:** Online learning can be more convenient

Example: Online education is more accessible to everyone (no concern with physically getting to school)

Example: Online learning is more flexible since it gives students a chance to work at their own pace

**Transition:** Nevertheless, it is important to weigh these advantages against all of the health benefits offered by in-person learning

**Support #1:** In-person learning is more beneficial to students' physical health than online learning

Example: Less screen time than with online learning

Example: More opportunity for exercise and fresh air when walking around campus

**Support #2:** The social benefits of in-person learning can improve students' mental health

Example: Online learning can make students feel disconnected and lonely

Example: Easier to meet new people in-person

Example: Ability to develop a support system for studying on campus

**Conclusion:**

Even though education is available online, in-person learning should remain the norm for most schools

Online learning may have some advantages, but these are outweighed by the numerous benefits of in-person learning

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