# Brainstorming, Outlining, and Organizing Your Paper

Sometimes it can be difficult to get the ideas you have in your head out into the world. Brainstorming, outlining, and organizing your paper are three different methods to help you start your writing process.

## Brainstorming

This step involves gathering inspiration for your writing and generating ideas.

1. Freewriting: Freewriting allows a writer to continuously write without stopping, generating many ideas without censoring or editing thoughts. This can help writers explore ideas they may not have thought of yet.
   ● To begin, simply open a document or grab a sheet of paper. Set a timer for ten minutes and write continuously without stopping or editing your ideas.
   ● Afterward, sort through your ideas to figure out what is important. These ideas can form a beginning or "jumping-off point" for your paper. If this does not work the first time, try freewriting multiple times.

2. Looping: This is an extended form of freewriting, where the writer freewrites, then reflects and analyzes his or her freewrite, then freewrites again. This allows the writer to get to the heart of ideas.
   ● Like freewriting, time yourself for ten minutes and write continuously.
   ● After writing, reflect on the main ideas of your freewrite. What idea is most compelling? What idea do you seem to keep coming back to? What idea is the most productive? What seems to be at the center?
   ● After reflecting, freewrite again, starting with your central or main idea to generate more ideas.
   ● Repeat the process to create multiple loops until you get to the center of what you want to write about.

3. Listing or Bulleting: Here the writer lists all the thoughts on a subject, including any important details. Similar to freewriting, this allows the writer to generate several ideas.
   ● Look at a research question and write down what you currently know about the topic.
   ● Creating more than one list can help generate ideas about what to write in your paper, including what you might need for various sections like your methods, literature review, conclusion, etc.

4. Webmaps or Clustering: This is a great strategy for visual learners to make connections between ideas. Similar to listing or looping, this allows the writer to draw relationships between ideas.
   ● Start with the central idea in the middle of the paper and circle it.
   ● Once you have the center, fill the rest of the page with connected ideas or phrases.
   ● Circle key ideas and connect them with lines.
   ● Shapes represent the type of idea and lines represent connections (see example to the right).
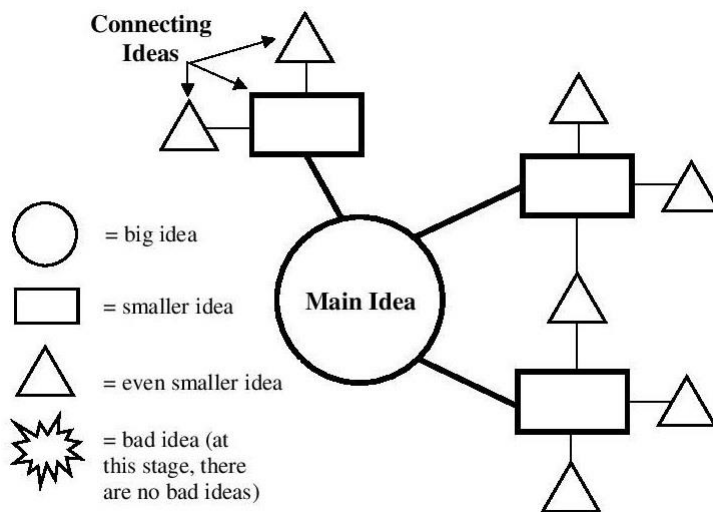
5. <u>Journalistic Questioning</u>: This technique allows the writer to ask journalistic questions, such as who, what, where, when, why and how. This provides context for ideas and helps create a framework for the paper. Notice below how these questions can be asked in any order and often answers lead to the next question.
   - Consider **who** is doing the action, such as the researchers.
   - **What** action are they performing? For example, a scientific experiment.
   - **How** did they do the experiment? You might consider what methods were used.
   - **Where** was it done? In a lab?
   - **Why** was it done? Here you might think about the research question/purpose.
   - **When** was it completed? This allows you to consider how recent the results are.

# Outlining

This step follows brainstorming and involves grouping ideas into similar topics or themes. There are two types of outlines: an outline for prewriting and a formal outline. An **outline for prewriting** is a way to consider all your ideas, particularly those that you came up with during brainstorming, and begin to group them into various categories. A **formal outline** lays out main points for readers and can serve as a final product, so it should follow specific conventions of the genre.

<u>Outlining for Prewriting</u>

1. Let's say you need to write an argumentative essay which convinces the reader that a dog is a great pet. Your first step might be to formulate a working thesis. (See our handout *Thesis Statements and Topic Sentences*) With your topic and thesis in mind look at all the information you have (see the brainstorming section above for more thoughts on how to generate ideas). For the paper about dogs being great pets, you generated a list of the following information:
   - A dog is a great pet
   - Friendly, exercise buddy, pet exposure lowers allergies in kids, companionship, various sizes and colors and breeds
   - Behavioral qualities (friendly and companionship), health benefits (exercise buddy and lowers allergies in kids), and lifestyle adaptability (various sizes, colors, and breeds)

2. Now you need to sort the ideas into similar categories or topics. Choose an outline structure that makes sense for the paper. For example:
   - Behavioral Qualities:
     o friendly
     o companionship
   - Health Benefits:
     o exercise buddy
     o pet exposure lowers allergies in kids
   - Lifestyle Adaptability:
     o various sizes, colors, and breeds

3. With ideas sorted, the next step is to evaluate. Do your current categories support your thesis? Do you see areas that need more or less information than what you currently have? Use this evaluation to rework your thesis statement, guide further research, or reorganize the structure, if necessary. Continue to add information to the outline in order to organize and simplify your thoughts as you move into the drafting stage.

4. As you begin to write your paper, you might continue thinking about your outline by reverse outlining your paper. **Reverse outlining** is a revision process that allows you to organize what you've already written and identify areas that need more or less information. After you have completed a draft, identify the main point of each paragraph and condense it into one sentence. (e.g., "This paragraph is about…").

Once you've made notes on the main point of your paper's paragraphs, evaluate them for revision. Here are some questions to help you think critically:

- Is your thesis statement the main point of your introduction?
- Does the main point of each paragraph build on your thesis statement?
- Is your organization of ideas (paragraph order) clear and logical? Would another organizational style be more effective?
- Are your topic sentences clear? Do you make use of transitional phrases? (See handout on *Transition Words and Phrases*)
- Do you need to cut out extra information?
- Are there weak places (or holes) in your argument?
- Are there paragraphs with similar ideas that could be combined? Are there paragraphs with too many ideas that need to be separated?

Formal Outline

Sometimes your professor will require a formal outline. A formal outline serves as an overview for your readers and allows them to understand the main points of your paper before they get into the details. There are two types of formal outlines: **topic outlines**, which use keywords and phrases and rely heavily on the concept of parallelism, and **sentence outlines**, which express each point as a complete sentence.

Regardless of the type of formal outline, each one should start with your thesis statement listed in its entirety and follow these three traits:

1. **Coordination**: Each point should have the same relationship to your main point. For example, if your first point is "Best water parks in the US" your second point should not be "Best roller coasters in the US" since this is a completely different topic.
2. **Subordination**: Make sure that each point in your outline goes from general headings to more specific subpoints. For example, if your first point is "Things you will need at the pool," use the subpoints to give examples like "Sunscreen," "Water," and "Snack Money."
3. **Division**: Each main point (or heading) on your outline must have at least two subpoints.

Once you have determined whether you will be using a topic or sentence outline, you will need to choose between the alphanumeric and decimal outline form. Both styles will have the thesis statement listed in its entirety.

**Alphanumeric Outline:**
Thesis: List your thesis in its entirety here.
- I. Main Point
  - A. Subpoint
  - B. Subpoint
  - C. Subpoint
- II. Main Point
  - A. Subpoint
  - B. Subpoint
    1. Supporting Detail
    2. Supporting Detail
    3. Supporting Detail
- III. Main Point
  - A. Subpoint
    1. Supporting Detail
    2. Supporting Detail
  - B. Subpoint

**Decimal Outline:**
Thesis: List your thesis in its entirety here.
- 1.0 Main Point
  - 1.1 Subpoint
  - 1.2 Subpoint
  - 1.3 Subpoint
- 2.0 Main Point
  - 2.1 Subpoint
  - 2.2 Subpoint
    - 2.2.1 Supporting Detail
    - 2.2.2 Supporting Detail
    - 2.2.3 Supporting Detail
- 3.0 Main Point
  - 3.1 Subpoint
    - 3.1.1 Supporting Detail
    - 3.1.2 Supporting Detail
  - 3.2 Subpoint

# Organizing

This step follows outlining. Organizing and structuring your paper is different for every academic style of writing and even for each individual paper depending on the topic.

Organization

Most papers follow a traditional style with necessary variations:

Introduction → Body Paragraphs (main ideas) → Conclusion

Variations might include an abstract, several paragraphs to elaborate one point, results from a study with discussion/analysis of the results, and a methods section to set up the study itself.

Specific Methods of Organization

Beyond the general organization format, there are three basic methods.

1. Chronological: With this method, the paper starts at the beginning of the event and moves through each consecutive event in the order in which it occurs.

    For example, in a biography you might organize the paper in the following way:

    *birth → childhood → adulthood → final years → lasting legacy*

2. Spatial: In this organizational method, the paper starts with an initial description and then continues in a logical manner. This form of organization can be applied to many different situations. Consider the following three examples.

    Description of a family:

    *paternal grandfather → paternal grandmother → father → mother → first child → second child*

    Description of a bicycle:

    *handlebars → gear shifts → body frame →seat → bike chain → wheels*

    Description of government bodies:

    *executive branch → legislative branch → judicial branch*

3. Persuasive Structures: Papers that use this type of organization are geared toward a specific climax or ending. There are several specific persuasive structures discussed below.

    a. Support Structure: These papers begin with the central idea/climax and use the rest of the paper as support.

        Consider the example of slavery.

        *slavery is still a modern issue and there are currently 30 million slaves worldwide (central idea) → types of slavery → history of slavery → countries with slavery → impacts of slavery*

    b. Discovery structure: These types of papers build to the climax/central idea, which is near the end of the paper.

        *types of slavery → history of slavery → countries with slavery → impacts of slavery → slavery is still a modern issue and there are currently 30 million slaves worldwide (central idea)*

c. <u>Pros and Cons Structure (Compare and Contrast)</u>: Papers in this category consider the strengths and weaknesses (positives and negatives) of an issue/argument.

Consider the differences between various types of exercise.

*benefits of running → disadvantages of running → benefits of yoga → disadvantages of yoga*

Here's an example where you want one side to dominate.

*(multiple) benefits of running → (few) disadvantages of running → (few) benefits of yoga → (multiple) disadvantages of yoga*

<u>Compare and Contrast</u> also falls under the pro and con structure. Here you are looking at the similarities and differences between two or more different topics/issues.

*health benefits of both running and yoga → health benefits only running possesses → health benefits only yoga possesses*

Certain genres and paper types fit better into one organizational style. See the chart below to see if there is a particular organizational style that might work best for your paper type.

**Chronological**

- Description of an event or series of events
- Grant proposals
- Literature review
- Memo (depending on content)
- Personal narrative/statement
- Scientific lab report
- Speeches (depending on content)

**Spatial**

- Definition
- Description of an item or place
- Literature review
- Speeches (depending on content)

**Persuasive Structures**

- Cause and effect (support or discovery)
- Definition
- Literature analysis (support, discovery, or compare and contrast)
- Memo (depending on content)
- Personal narrative/statement (support, discovery)
- Problem solving
- Research/persuasive argument
- Rhetorical analysis (support, discovery, or compare and contrast)
- Speeches (depending on content)

Works Consulted:

UNC-Chapel Hill Writing Center (http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/brainstorming/); Purdue University Online Writing Lab (https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/); The University of Nevada's Writing Center (http://writingcenter.unlv.edu/writing/l); *The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing*, 5th ed. (Ramage, Bean, and Johnson)