

Essay Outlining: Creating a Blueprint for your Paper

Is an essay outline just a waste of time? Certainly not! By composing an essay outline before drafting a paper, you can organize your thoughts, establish connections between ideas, evaluate your arguments, and ensure that all of your evidence supports your thesis. You might think of your essay's arguments like gears in an engine. They all need to be lined up in the right place to allow your paper to function, and an outline is your blueprint to make sure this happens!

Before constructing an outline, you should review your research notes to develop a working thesis statement. For tips on crafting a thesis statement, see our tip sheet on "Overcoming the Thesis Statement."

The Outlining Process



1. Organize your notes

- Begin by organizing your research notes. Think about which of your notes might be grouped together under a common heading. Go through your research and assign each fact, idea, or example to a group.
- If any ideas or notes don't seem to fit or connect to your thesis, don't be afraid to eliminate them.
- Next, place each of your smaller note groups into more general concept categories. You should aim to have no more than three or four categories for a 7-10 page paper. For example, "Jesus' understanding of women" and "Jesus' teaching on women" could both be grouped under "Jesus' opinion of women."

2. Phrase your main points

- With your thesis in mind, think of a way you can word your concept categories as argumentative phrases or topic sentences. These phrases or topic sentences, and the notes you grouped with them, will be the points and sub points (or support) you use to defend your thesis. They will form the body of your essay. Your topic sentence for "Jesus' opinion of women" might state, "Jesus established women's value through his ministry."

3. Arrange your points and evidence

- You should now have a set of 3-4 main points (perhaps with sub points), along with examples, illustrations, and other support which you gathered in your research. Determine a suitable and effective order for your points. You might arrange points climactically (placing your strongest argument at the end) or chronologically (for example, by writing about the Gospels before the Epistles). Place your arguments, sub points, and examples into a visual outline. You can find a sample outline (albeit more formal) on the back of this handout.
- When placing quotations or examples in your outline, include the author and page number of the sources for quick reference.

4. Revise your outline

- As you write your paper, you may adjust your thesis or points, or change them completely, so that both are clearly connected. Be prepared to add, remove, or alter points, or to swap their positions.

(Adapted from David Kornhaber. *Outlining*. The Writing Center at Harvard University. 2000. Web. 14 Feb. 2013.)

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Example of a Formal Essay Outline

The Role of Women in the Early Church

I. Introduction

- A. Opening: Breaking social barriers
- B. Thesis: The ministries of Jesus and Paul uplift women and portray them as intelligent and dignified.

II. Women in Jesus' Teaching and Ministry

- A. Correction of sexist attitudes in marital relationships
 - i. Adultery (Matthew 5:28, 32)
 - ii. Divorce (Matthew 19:6, 8)
- B. Jesus' esteem of women
 - i. Used women as moral examples
 - a. Widow's mite (Mark 12:41-44)
 - b. Woman at Bethany (Mark 14:6-8)
 - ii. Acknowledged women for their understanding of Jesus' ministry
 - a. Revelation to the Samaritan woman (John 4:7-26)
 - b. Honour accorded to female disciples (Luke 8:1-3; Cohick p. 310)
 - iii. Noted the loyalty of the female disciples
 - a. Women at the crucifixion (Matthew 27:55-56; O'Collins and Kendall p. 640)
 - b. Mary Magdalene first to witness the resurrected Jesus (John 20:16-17)

III. Women in Paul's Teaching and Ministry

- A. Female collaborators in Paul's Ministry
 - i. Romans 16 catalogue
 - ii. Priscilla (Acts 18)
 - iii. Phoebe and Apphia (Smith p.152)
- B. Christian wives and pagan husbands
 - i. Witnesses to husbands (1 Cor. 7:16)
 - ii. Risk of abuse (MacDonald p.192)
 - iii. Intergenerational faith (2 Tim. 1:5)
- C. Paul's esteem of women
 - i. Equal authority over husband's body (1 Cor. 7:4, Stark p.120-121)
 - ii. Value of single women (1 Cor. 7:40)

- **Note:** Unless submitted to a professor, your outline does not have to be numbered and indented in this manner. An informal outline for your own purposes can be as simple as one that consists of point-form notes for an introduction, a body (with the main points highlighted and support listed for each), and a conclusion, with these same broad headings.

(This outline was adapted from Elyssa Tardiff and Alan Brizee. "Developing an Outline: Types of Outlines and Samples." *The Writing Process*. Purdue Online Writing Lab. 2013. Web. 19 Feb. 2013.)