

How to Create an Effective Outline

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Outlining is a powerful tool when writing a paper, especially when writing an argument-driven paper. The outline is where you organize your ideas and your arguments. If you put in the proper effort when developing your outline, then writing the actual paper follows quite easily.

When creating an outline, use a “top down” approach, not a “linear” approach. A linear approach would be one in which you start by writing the complete outline for the first section of the paper, then you write the complete outline for the second section of the paper, then you write the complete outline for the third section of the paper.... If you do this, you might find that after you are half-way done, the logical flow of ideas doesn’t work, and that something you put in the first section doesn’t fit with something that comes in a later section.

Think about how builders construct a house. They don’t use a linear approach. That is, they *don’t* start by completely building one room in the house, then move on and complete the second room in the house, then move on and complete the third room in the house.... If they tried this, they might get half-way done and realize that the rooms aren’t going to fit together the way they planned – and at that point, to re-do it means tearing the whole thing down and starting all over.

So what do builders do instead? They start by pouring the foundation, then putting up the frame for the whole house. After the frame is up, they put in drywall. After the drywall is up, they put in floors, counters, and cabinets. Finally they finish with details like faucet handles, carpets, etc. This ensures that all the rooms fit together like they planned, and the final product is what they wanted. They start with a frame, then fill it in. This is a “top down” approach.

Writing an outline is kind of like building a house. Each section of your paper is like a room. You don’t want to move linearly from one room to the next. Instead, you want to first build the frame for the whole outline, then fill it in, until at the end you are adding details.

Let’s go through the process for a made-up paper topic: *Which make better pets, cats or dogs?* In response to this prompt, I will demonstrate “top-down” outlining so you can see how it works. I’ll move through four stages of the outline, each one more detailed than the previous. Notice how I start with a foundation, then build a frame, and then fill in that frame with more and more details at each stage.

“Level 1” outline:

- I. Introduction
- II. Main Body
- III. Conclusions

This is pretty much always what your “level 1” outline will look like. This is like pouring the foundation of the house. You can’t even really tell yet what is coming. That’s OK – let’s go to the next level where we build the frame and make it (metaphorically) look like a house.

“Level 2” outline:

- I. Introduction
 - A. General introduction to the topic
 - B. Motivate the paper / establish the debate to be resolved
 - C. State thesis: dogs make better pets
- II. Main Body
 - A. Dogs are easier to train
 - B. Dogs can be more useful than cats
 - C. Dogs have better personalities
 - D. Refute common “pro-cat” arguments
- III. Conclusions
 - A. Summarize main reasons why dogs are better
 - B. Closing thoughts

Already we can see a big difference from the “level 1” outline. At this stage of the outline, the thesis is clear (dogs make better pets) and you can see that the thesis addresses the prompt. Also, in the Main Body part of the paper, you can see the main arguments that will be used in support of this thesis. Just by reading this level 2 outline, you can tell the main reasons why I think dogs make better pets than cats.

This is like building the frame of the house and putting in the rough electrical and the rough plumbing – you can tell it is a house, and you can probably tell how many rooms there are going to be, and maybe you can even tell the bedrooms from the bathrooms from the kitchen. (Is this metaphor working? I think so.)

However, what is missing at this point is any level of support to my arguments. At this point, they are just statements of opinion. How am I going to prove that dogs are easier to train, or that dogs are more useful than cats? That must be provided at the next level of detail.

“Level 3” outline:

- I. Introduction
 - A. General introduction to the topic
 - 1. Give statistics of how many pet owners there are in the U.S.
 - 2. Demonstrate that cats, dogs are the two most popular pets in the U.S.
 - B. Motivate the paper / establish the debate to be resolved
 - 1. Use survey data where Americans were asked which they prefer
 - 2. Maybe find figures for \$\$ spent on dogs, cats in pet chains like Petsmart
 - 3. Maybe find a famous quote about “cat” vs “dog” people
 - C. State thesis: dogs make better pets
- II. Main Body
 - A. Dogs are easier to train
 - 1. Dogs have bigger vocabulary of human (English) words
 - 2. Dogs can be trained to perform complicated tasks (e.g., retrieving)
 - 3. Dogs learn commands and tasks more quickly than cats
 - B. Dogs can be more useful than cats
 - 1. Dogs protect homes from burglars
 - 2. Dogs protect family members from fire, danger, etc.
 - 3. Dogs can guide, help police, work a farm, go hunting, etc.
 - C. Dogs have better personalities
 - 1. Dogs are less aloof
 - 2. Dogs are always happy to see their owners
 - 3. Dogs are more empathetic – they can tell when you need cheering
 - 4. Dogs are more interactive – wrestling, playing fetch, etc.
 - D. Refute common “pro-cat” arguments
 - 1. Refute “cats are more self-sufficient” or “cats don’t need as much care/work”
 - 2. Refute “cats are neater” or variations thereof
 - 3. Refute “cats are less expensive” or variations thereof
 - 4. Refute “cats have better manners”
- III. Conclusions
 - A. Summarize main reasons why dogs are better
 - B. Closing thoughts

Now things are really starting to fill in. You can really see how I am going to prove that dogs are better than cats. However, I am still missing the facts and details necessary to build a convincing case. I have claimed that dogs have bigger vocabularies, for instance – but what *specific* data will I use to show that?

“Level 4” outline:

Here is where you start putting in specific details and references that you can cite. In the interest of space, I won't re-produce the whole outline here. (Also, I don't have the time to *really* write a paper about cats versus dogs, and it would take quite a bit of research time to find all the details that I would need for the fourth-level outline. That's right, it takes time and effort to write a good paper! Since this is just a demonstration, it is not worth my time and effort to really do the necessary research – but on your assignment, you should put in the time and effort to find specific details that support your arguments.) But here are a couple excerpts so you can see what it should look like at level 4.

I. Introduction

A. General introduction to the topic

1. Give statistics of how many pet owners there are in the U.S.
 - a. 78 million dogs, 86 million cats in the U.S. (Humane Society, 2011)
 - b. 39% of US households have a dog, 33% have a cat (Humane Society, 2011)
2. *etc.*

...

II. Main Body

A. Dogs are easier to train

1. Dogs have bigger vocabulary of human (English) words
 - a. Rico the border collie, 200 words (Kaminski et al., *Science*, 2004)
 - b. Chaser the border collie, 1000 words (Pilley & Reid, *Behavioural Processes*, 2011)
 - c. Bailey the Yorkshire terrier, 100+ words (Griebel & Oller, *PLOS One*, 2012)
2. *etc.*

Notice that at this level of the outline, I am providing specific facts, figures, and details that support my claims. I am also indicating the references for those facts, figures, and details. (These are not made up, by the way – they're real – you can look them up!) If possible, you should go to this level of detail for all the points that you had in your third-level outline. If your outline goes to this level of detail, as it should, then you will have an easy time writing your rough draft with your outline as a guide. If you can't go to this level of detail in your outline, then it probably means you haven't done enough research yet!