

HOW TO CREATE AN OUTLINE

If the example outlines in the textbook terrify you—*how* do they get so detailed?!?—then this guide is for you. First off, *no* outline ever looks as detailed as that *from the beginning*. That's what the books always forget to tell you: they show you outlines *in their final finished form*, but hardly ever how to build up outlines like that. This is how to build an outline from the ground up—it's like creating boxes or files and then filling them as you go.

First, pick your idea/ **TENTATIVE THESIS** (what you *think* this paper is about; you can always tweak this later). Write this tentative thesis on a Post-it Note or something that you can put right in front of you and look back to. This *isn't* the finished one yet, so don't worry.

Second, start writing down, in no particular order, ideas that come to you about this thesis and the story it's about. Just scribble down whatever comes into your head—you'll pick through it and put it all in order in a moment.

Third, look through those notes and circle ***three or so*** things that work as smaller pieces of your tentative thesis, things that will help illustrate/explain your thesis. Use these to decide what categories, and how many categories, you can divide your discussion into—assign each category a line of its own, leaving lots of spaces between categories for inserting things.

Fourth, take those three or so things, and write ***one*** of them at the top of a separate sheet of paper (so the first idea on one sheet, the second idea on another sheet, etc.).

Now, take one sheet of paper at a time and look for support from the story for that one idea: quotations, paraphrases, etc. Work ***only*** on that one idea for that one sheet of paper. Next to each quotation, fill in briefly how you will explain that quotation to your reader, and what it actually shows. Do this for each category, *one category at a time*. This'll help keep your essay from wandering. **DO THIS FOR EACH SHEET OF PAPER.**

Then, go back through each sheet of paper: does everything on there have to do with ***only*** the one idea for that sheet of paper? If so, fine. If not, get rid of whatever doesn't work.

Seventh, double-check that the idea written at the top of each sheet of paper still refers to, or is a piece of, the big tentative thesis on the Post-It note.

Now, working from each sheet of paper in order one at a time, take the information on each sheet and write it into complete sentences and paragraphs (if there's enough for more than one paragraph). Work on one sheet at a time, until you've done all of them.

Now, line everything up and read it through: does it all flow? Do you go off into unrelated ideas? Correct this. Forgot to cite a quotation? Look up the page number now, and put it in according to MLA style.

Fix your grammar. Reread; fix your grammar again. Delete weak verbs, double-check words you're not sure of, etc.