Guide to Writing an Outline

An outline is a skeleton of your paper. Outlines are to a full paper as a pencil sketch is to a finished painting. Once you have an outline, you only need to fill in the details to get a paper.

Outlines contain the central ideas of your paper:

- the thesis (clearly stated in a single sentence),
- argument for that thesis (separating out the key ideas),
- objections and replies.
- They shoulf also signal where you will
  - define key terms and elaborate on these definitions,
  - discuss the central points in another philosopher's work,
  - include other important components in a paper (e.g., a roadmap in the introduction, or a conclusion that restates your thesis).

Importantly, outlines **organize your central ideas in a way that makes clear the structure of your overall argument**. Outlines are

- *selective*: they mention only the central points in the paper, without in-depth explanation.
- *organized*: they place your ideas where they will go in the paper, separate out new ideas into their own bullet points, and allow for indenting points that you are introducing to justify the point the indented points are below.

Outlines should have a **hierarchical structure**, using indenting and bullet points to represent the relationship between different parts of the paper (e.g. separate premises; an objection, reply to that objection, counter, and final reply…).

Outlining is crucial. I don't know of any paper written without an outline. An outline:

- provides a reference for all the ideas you want to include and organizes them.
- helps you make sure to leave 'slots' for answering every part of the question;
- helps you detect gaps in your argument;
- helps keep track of what the central points are so that they don't get obscured by explanations and asides.

Getting a good outline is a large part of the process of arriving at the first draft. Once you have the outline, what is left is filling it in, expanding on its point—which feels much more manageable than approaching a whole paper. You might find yourself revising your outline as you go along; but it is a good idea to keep using it as a reference point, especially to keep to a streamlined structure and not forget important components of your argument.

How to write an outline

Writing an outline requires setting aside time for brainstorming and reflection.

1. Once you have a question (and presumably, though not always, a direction you want to go in) you need to allocate time to
   a. Talking with others
   b. Thinking back to reading and class discussion
   c. Checking notes from class discussion
   d. Free writing/journaling

2. At some point, take a position (or select the argument that seems most promising to you): given your brainstorming, which position are you going to take? It is very normal to be unsure! You don't have to argue for a view you are confident in. You just need to have a clearly stated view and an argument for it.
3. Try to sketch the argument, separating out the main premises and assumptions. (Diagrams, standard argument form, can be helpful – but are not necessary.) You might think of multiple arguments; if so, pick the one that seems strongest.
4. Identify potential weaknesses in this position. These will help you come up with objections to the view and arguments supporting the view.
5. Identify and select potential objections.
6. Sketch responses to these objections.
7. Fill in the outline.

Give yourself time; let ideas ripen in your head. Don't do it all at once!

Skeleton outline to fill in (optional, but recommended as starting point)

1. Introduction

a. The question that drives the paper (i.e. the prompt you are addressing)
b. Motivation for the question: a couple of points on why this question is interesting or important
c. Thesis: The position that the paper will take on the question
d. *Paragraph summarizing the argument you will give*

2. Central part of the paper: the argument for your view

This should include the key premises of your argument, and hierarchically underneath them, the central points in support of those premises. You may also want to include where you will offer definitions of technical terms, which examples you will give, and case stuies or empirical evidence that you will appeal to; always under the relevant portion of the argument. This can and should be broken into sub-sections; one natural way to do that is to give each key premise its own sub-section.

3**. Objections and Replies (recommended at this stage)**

a. Objection (your own or something in the literatue; if the latter, attribute)
b. Response to the objection you identified (repeat these stages if considering more than one objection)

4. Conclusion

a. *Restatement of your position*
b. Brief restatement of your argument for your position