Guide to Writing an Outline

What is 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 of your argument to get a paper.

Outlines contain the central ideas of your paper. In a philosophy paper, those are your thesis (the position you take on the question in the prompt), argument for that thesis, and objections and replies.

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. They are also *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.

Why should you write an outline?

You might be thinking: why should I bother to spend time on outlining instead of moving right on to writing, taking ideas from my head to the page? Wouldn't skipping the outline save time?

The answer is 'no', at least when you are writing something longer than a couple of paragraphs. Before you start writing, you need to know what you want to say: what your main argument is, and what the main potential objections to it are, and how you will reply. You also need to have a sense of how the different points in your paper fit together. This is precisely what an outline help you achieve.

Without an outline, you are much more likely to get stuck, because you are much more likely to find out that you don't quite know what you are trying to say or discover problems for your argument that you don't know how to address.

An outline is also useful in leading you to write a paper that fully, clearly, and convincingly answers the question. An outline helps you make sure to leave 'slots' for answering every part of the question; detect gaps in your argument; and keep track of what the central points are so that they don't get obscured by explanations and asides.

Indeed, once you have an outline, at least half the work of working on your paper is done: you have a structure that you just need to fill in. The actual writing process will be quicker and involve less frustration, and fewer unforeseen problems.

What an outline should look like

Philosophy can be done in many different formats. That said, there is a standard form for philosophy papers, and, at this stage, I want you to learn how to write in that format, which has the virtue of focusing attention on the argument—not on rhetorical flourishes—and of encouraging clarity and precision. To outline a paper in this format, all you need to do is fill in the following template:

1. **Introduction**
    a. The question that drives the paper (i.e. the prompt you are addressing)
    b. Justification for the question: a couple of points on why this question is interesting or important (optional)
    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.**

a. This should present and explain your argument for your view. Your goal is to give compelling reasons for your thesis. Compelling reasons are true (or plausible) claims that *support* the thesis, that is, make it more likely to be true. In your outline, you should include the reasons you will be offering, and list them in separate bullet points. Sometimes, when giving premises for a conclusion, we also need to explain why those premises are true. Your outline should also include defending the premises of your argument (unless those premises are obviously true).
b. If you are using technical terminology, you should explicitly introduce it when you first use it and offer a definition. Your outline should include *definitions* of terms that play an important role in your argument.

3. **Objections and Replies**
    a. Objection to your thesis or to your argument (your own or someone else's; if the latter, attribute)
    b. Response to the objection you identified
    c. Repeat if you want to consider more than one objection (for the midterm, I am only expecting you to consider one objection)
4. **Conclusion**
    a. Restatement of your position
    b. Brief restatement of your argument for your position

The points in italics do not need to be replaced in the outline you hand in (e.g. you don't need to actually summarize your argument in the outline); they are there just to remind you that you need to include expansions on those points in your final paper.

How to write an outline

Writing an outline—like writing a paper—requires setting aside time for brainstorming and reflection. If time allows, you should aim to spend time thinking about the central question and talking with others about it before sitting down to articulate the structure of your paper by writing an outline.

1. Your starting point is the prompt (a question or collection of questions). Read it and brainstorm some ideas: what considerations in favor of/against different answers to the question can you think of? Helpful things to do are:
    a. Talking with others
    b. Thinking back to reading and class discussion
    c. Checking notes from class discussion
2. Take a position: 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. Identify potential weaknesses in this position. These will help you come up with objections to the view and arguments supporting the view.
4. Brainstorm arguments for that position. Helpful things to do are the same as in point 1: talking with others, thinking back to reading and class discussion, and checking notes from class discussion.
5. Pick the strongest argument for that position and state the argument in clear terms. You might want to draw a diagram with the conclusion at the top or write it down in standard argument form, with numbered premises leading to the conclusion.
6. Identify and select potential objections.
7. Sketch responses to these objections.
8. Fill in the outline.