

Creating an Outline

This handout uses a very simple content and essay structure to show you a process you can use to create an essay outline starting with a topic for your essay and then building in the supporting ideas below it.

Basic Principles

Developing an outline before you write your paper helps you make sure that your essay is organized and that the content is relevant. If you think through an outline before you start, you generally have a stronger paper which needs less revision and takes less time to write.

Keep it simple. It is much easier to check that your essay is organized properly if all points are short. You can always combine points and change your wording later as you write your essay. Write out full sentences only for the thesis and topic sentences. For the rest, just make notes. Don't worry about grammar or spelling at the outlining stage.

Stay on track. Outlines allow you to easily see if all your points are organized and relevant. To do this, check that each point in your outline clearly supports your thesis statement.

Back it up. When you make your outline, you need to consider whether you have included enough specific evidence to support your ideas. This evidence can include specific facts, quotes from experts, statistics and logical reasoning. Always ask yourself why, how, what, when, where, and who. The more specific your evidence is, the better your essay will be.

The Thesis Statement

The very first step in making your outline is to create a thesis statement.

What is your general subject? Pets

What question would you like to answer? What animal makes a good pet?

Your answer, or your draft thesis: Cats are excellent pets.

Once you have your draft thesis statement, think of a number of reasons why (how, what, etc.) this is true. **(Back it up!)**

Why are cats excellent pets?

- They are independent
- They are loving
- They can reduce stress

Now let's put it all together; your complete thesis statement is:

Cats make excellent pets because they are independent, loving, and relaxing.

The Structure of the Outline

The outline is a simple structure of how you will organize your essay. This example uses an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion.

The introduction

In this simple essay structure, your thesis statement will become the last sentence of your introduction paragraph. Check with your assignment instructions for details about how to format your introduction and conclusion.

The body paragraphs

Use each of your reasons as the topic sentence for a separate body paragraph. Ask yourself how each point relates to your thesis.

- 1) Topic sentence: Cats are independent pets. **(Why does being independent make an excellent pet?)**
 - a) Can go away for the weekend and the cat is fine by itself **(Back it up with specific details!)**
 - i) Just have to leave food and water for it **(Why/how else does being independent make cat excellent pets?)**
 - b) Don't have to take it for a walk
 - i) Get their exercise by hunting birds
 - c) Doesn't need a bath **(Back it up. Ask yourself who, why, when, where, what, or how.)**
 - i) Lick themselves clean
- 2) Topic sentence: Cats are loving. **(How does being loving make cats excellent pets?)**
 - a) Keep you company **(Back it up.)**
 - i) A cat may curl up on your stomach while you are watching TV. **(Use sources to back up your own thoughts.)**
 - (1) "The companionship between a cat and its owner is a grand thing." (Brown, James "I'm not Alone" 1979, p. 23)
 - b) Make the owner feel special
 - i) Old age homes introduce pets to give the patients a companion who will always love them back
- 3) Topic sentence: Cats can reduce stress. **(How does this relate to your thesis statement? How/why/when does reducing stress make cats excellent pets?)**
 - a) The purring is soothing
 - i) Like listening to your favorite CD
 - b) Owner doesn't have to worry about the pet
 - i) Cat is happy being alone **(Use sources to back up your own thoughts.)**
 - (1) "While monitoring the stress levels in 50 cats, Dr. Wong found no significant difference when the cats were left by themselves for the weekend" (Hanna, 2002, p. 47)
 - (2) Only have to make sure they have food and water and a clean litter box
 - c) "Cats have been found to reduce stress in both children and adults" (National Pet Magazine, 1999, p.18)

Conclusion

Some essays will need a concluding paragraph. One way to conclude an essay is to restate your thesis statement in the first sentence of your conclusion.

