

Developing an Outline

(William and Mary Writing Center, OWL @ Purdue, and Dr. Joel Adams)

In its simplest form, an outline consists of nothing more than your thesis / arguable question and a list of the supporting evidence. To this you can add as much or as little detail as you need to remind yourself of the information you will include. Don't get bogged down creating an overly detailed outline. If you find yourself saying: "Now it's time to move on to Roman numeral IV, Point C, Section 7, Subsection (f)," it means you've spent too much time outlining.

For the purposes of the example below, imagine you are constructing an outline exploring the American Great Depression and the effectiveness of the New Deal.

Step 1: Beneath the thesis statement / arguable question, note that you will start with your introduction, and what the introduction will include.

Step 2: Then you will follow with a body section of background information on the Great Depression; remember that in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the New Deal, you need to identify what problems the New Deal was intended to solve.

Step 3: Next, you will chart / explore / analyze your supporting evidence. List the points you wish to cover. Do the same for the contrary evidence. If you think it will help, note where you will place statistics or quotations. Choose the quotations that best support your thesis.

Quote directly when the quotation clearly and succinctly states the point you wish to make, or illustrates a point you have made. When the quotation is wordy or provides only basic facts, you will want to paraphrase the material. You should also paraphrase to avoid overuse of quotations: your paper should not be a series of quotations linked by an occasional transition sentence (of course, you must cite paraphrases just as you would a quotation).

The arrangement you choose to present your evidence (both supporting and contrary) can take many forms including chronological and conceptual. Experiment with different arrangements to find which is best for your topic and question.

Step 4: Finally, indicate where you will conclude your essay.

Your completed outline might look like this:

Thesis / Arguable question: Although the New Deal did not end the Depression, it was a success in restoring public confidence and creating new programs that brought relief to millions of Americans.

I. Introduction

A. Introduce the topic in a way that will catch the reader's attention. [See the HWRC handout on "Interesting Intros" available on our web site or in the History Writing Resources Center.]

B. State your thesis. In many cases, the thesis is the last sentence of the introductory paragraph, but you may place it anywhere in the paragraph for reasons of style or in accordance with your professor's instructions.

C. Review the main points of evidence you will cover later in the paper to support your thesis.

II. Background

A. Problems of the Depression that the New Deal tried to solve

1. Sense of despair
2. Collapse of financial system
3. High unemployment
4. Shrinking economy

III. Supporting Evidence

A. Restored Public Confidence

1. Sense of Roosevelt's personal concern for people (quotation from woman on FDR's first radio address)
2. Flurry of government activity in "Hundred Days"

B. Improved America's Financial Health

1. Bank Holiday
2. Created government agencies such as FDIC to protect people's savings

C. Reduced Unemployment

1. CCC put people to work at productive tasks such as building park facilities (quotation from CCC worker)
2. WPA put people to work and performed needed construction tasks

(number of people employed through WPA)

D. Created Social Security

1. Provided immediate benefits to the elderly
(amount of assistance provided in first five years)
2. Has become a cornerstone of financial security for senior citizens

IV. Contrary Evidence

A. Did Not End the Depression

1. World War II did, but New Deal reduced the Depression's worst effects
2. Some New Deal Programs such as Agricultural Adjustment Act were declared unconstitutional, but at least Roosevelt was trying to find solutions

V. Conclusion

Your conclusion should not be a rephrasing of your introductory paragraph. Although you should briefly summarize how the evidence supports your thesis and how it outweighs the contradictory evidence, you should also use the conclusion to consider the larger implications of your topic. For example, in this sample assignment, you might consider any or all of the following points: the legacy of the New Deal, the impact of World War II on the American economy, and the continued growth of social programs in postwar America.

This is all you need for an effective outline. It requires very little time to create, and can save you a great deal of time and plenty of aggravation when you write your paper.