

# NINE STEPS FOR OUTLINING AN ESSAY

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Your essay is disorganized if your written ideas seem thrown together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Outlining will help you find the pattern for those pieces. It can be a creative part of planning and writing non-fiction. The following nine-step process will help you organize both non-fiction essays and books.

## Narrow your topic statement

Decide on a topic and then remind yourself who your audience is. List some ways that you can make your topic appeal to your audience, and then pick the option that appeals to you most.

## Explore new patterns of thought

**Be careful not to generalize.** "Alcoholism is bad" is too general--you just don't know where to take a topic like that. Narrow down your topic until you are saying something that someone could disagree with. For instance, "Alcoholism, while hurtful to individuals, actually serves a useful function in our society as a whole," is specific enough that people are going to ask you to prove it. That's a thesis statement. Try writing down several different versions of your thesis. Choose one you like because your thesis will determine how you organize your essay.

## List ideas under general headings

Use note cards to catalogue your ideas and data. Cards can be labeled with general headings such as:

history
present problems
extent and significance of problem
definition of key terms
solutions

## Arrange ideas into a logical pattern

Here are some options for patterning your paper:

<b>Chronological</b>	<b>Problem and</b>
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<b>arrangement:</b> Organize your topic into past, present, and future.	<b>Solution:</b> Show how your topic can be happier than you originally thought.
<b>Random:</b> Only do this if your main headings are of equal importance.	<b>Deduction:</b> Move from generalizations to conclusions citing specific cases.
<b>Cause and Effect:</b> Start with one topic and show how it caused another topic. Connect the two.	<b>Hierarchical:</b> Move from least important to most important or vice versa.
<b>Step-by-Step:</b> Show how your topic is actually a series of smaller topics.	<b>Induction:</b> Move from specifics to a general conclusion.
<b>Spatial arrangement:</b> Connect topics by their relation to each other in space.	

### Accumulate data

Check your outline for any holes. Is it heavy on factual data but short on authoritative testimony? Fearing rejection, most writers err on the side of over-researching a topic. An outline can save you time and quell your anxieties since it will tell you exactly how much data you need and how to organize it.

### Rethink the logic of your outline

There are three reasons to rethink what you have done up to this point:

1. You can delete material that interferes with the logical sequence.
2. You can catch errors of thought, language, or data.
3. A change of pattern, from chronological to problem solving, is easily done at this stage.

### Ask your outline questions

With a clean copy of your outline in hand, try to find out what you have left out or overlooked. A good question to ask is "so what?"--this will ensure that you have backed up what you have said and will also help you delete information that may not be necessary.

### Do more research

While it is easy to do too much research, it is also easy to do too little. An outline shows if you have made statements that you cannot prove. A short phone call or a brief trip to the library can solve this problem.

### Transform your outline into a final manuscript

An effective outline is the bare bones of the article. It must be fleshed out with lively style and, of course, convincing material.

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