



English Language Support ¹

Outlining an Essay

Why Outline?

Just because you have composed a **thesis statement**¹ doesn't mean that you are ready to start writing your essay. Outlining your ideas will help you see the structure of your main points and sub-points clearly. Outlining will also help you check the logic and completeness of what you will be writing, revealing any gaps, repetition, or illogical steps in the development of your essay. Outlining your essay will also help you manage your time more efficiently – you can break down the outline into manageable sections – and then assign yourself reasonable time to write the first draft of each section. Remember, the introduction can be very time consuming – leave it until the end – it is much easier to write the introduction when you have finished the first draft.

Before You Outline

Planning / Outlining is Step #5 of *The Writing Process*¹. This is the last step before you begin to write your essay. As you develop your outline, keep in mind **the length of the assignment**. How many words / pages do you have to produce for this writing assignment? Although you may have many great ideas, it is in your outline where you decide how many ideas you will develop in your essay and which ones will be a priority. For example, if you have been assigned a 1,000 word essay and you have decided upon 5 supporting arguments, this would mean approximately 150 words per argument. Ask yourself: *Are 150 words enough to thoroughly develop each argument, ensuring I will be able to discuss all of the important points?* Typically, your arguments should all be equally developed and of equal relevance to your topic. If you feel you can justify discussing one argument for 500 words and yet use only 100 words for another, you should probably reassess your outline and decide which argument could be cut from your outline.

Are you ready? Here is what you need in order to ensure you are ready to write your outline:

- A topic
- A thesis statement
- Supporting arguments to back up your thesis. Each argument is of fairly equal relevance, and the number of supporting arguments fits with the length of the assignment.

Sample Outline Structure

Here is an example of a possible outline using the **linear style**. Notice that the points have been ranked in order of their importance – a decision has to be made whether an item has a major role or merely a minor role to play. In order to rank your ideas, assign numbers or letters to your ideas. The number / letter system for a formal outline is illustrated in the model outline below. Notice the subgroups are indented to the right. As you move to the right, the ideas become more and more specific. The essay is laid out in a visual way so that you can see how it is organized. Remember that you do not have to write full sentences, this is only an outline. Visually, you will be able to see if some of your sections are repetitive or redundant. A test of a good outline is if you can look at the outline and orally summarize your essay to someone who is unfamiliar with the topic.

¹ See ELS Handouts: *Thesis Statements, The Writing Process, The first 5 steps of the Writing Process*.

If you don't get confused and your audience follows the sequence of your arguments, you have succeeded and you are ready to begin writing the first draft. If your audience needs clarification, this may tell you that you still have a little work to do – maybe one of your arguments is ambiguous, or the sequence of arguments does not flow in a logical sequence. Remember, although you are very familiar with this topic, you must write for a general audience, therefore do not assume people are familiar with your topic.

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| <p>I. Introduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Topic - Get audience's attention - Thesis statement <p>II. Main Idea #1</p> <p>A. Supporting points</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detail • Detail <p>III. Main Idea #2</p> <p>A. Supporting points</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detail • Detail <p>IV. Main Idea #3</p> <p>A. Supporting points</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detail • Detail <p>V. Conclusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detail |
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Sample Essay Outline

The outline below shows a short persuasive essay consisting of three main arguments that defend the thesis, plus supporting evidence. Note that each section has a small thesis statement (or topic sentence) of its own. Topic sentences are best written as full sentences in the outline to ensure clarity. Note also that the subdivisions allow you to see at a glance what items have the most support (and also, what might be in need of greater support or development). The example below provides one of the most common structures for an essay – it develops from a general point that is narrowed down in the thesis statement. Not every essay, however, will move from the general to the specific. While this example essay uses a familiar three-part structure (i.e. Introduction + Main Body + Conclusion), an essay is easily expanded or contracted depending on the breadth and depth of information you have to include. You will become very familiar with your topic, thesis and supporting arguments – you decide if you want your outline to be in *point form* (i.e. very brief) or in more complete sentences.

I. Introduction

- **Topic question:** Is **downloading** music without permission theft?
 - There are lots of arguments both ways on this subject.
 - Invention of the internet & copyable audio-file formats made downloading and sharing music very easy.
- **Thesis statement:** Downloading music for free is equal to stealing.

*** Generate your arguments to support your thesis by turning your thesis into a question, i.e., **How is downloading music for free equal to stealing?**

II. Main Idea #1: Downloading music for free is a legal issue.

A. Supporting points:

- Theft is taking something from someone who is the rightful owner without their permission.
- Artists own the rights to their own music.
- Music is under copyright + Music is *intellectual property*, and taking it without permission should be considered a criminal act - despite the fact that "everyone is doing it."

III. Main Idea #2: Downloading music for free is an ethical issue.

A. Supporting points

- Principles of morality, i.e. what is right and what is wrong.
- There is no difference between taking the music for free off the internet and taking it for free out of a store.
- Intellectual property = Intangible. This should be treated the same way as tangible property, i.e. something physical that you can touch.

IV. Main Idea #3: Downloading music for free results in a loss of income.

A. Supporting point

- Musicians love making music → but if people download their music for free, simply because they can → music won't be a good, stable source of income Record companies will also lose money. Record companies have a very positive role to play: they scout for new talent + offer training and production studios for up-and-coming musicians + they provide valuable marketing services, making sure that new artists get heard.
- Therefore many jobs related to the music industry will be affected.
- Talent will be underdeveloped → so, downloading music without permission will lead to fewer good musicians → not only bad for the musicians, but also for general public → we'll have less good music to listen to.

V. Conclusion

- Just because it's easy and everyone is doing it, downloading music for free is wrong both ethically and morally, and deprives both the artist and the recording companies of income.
- Restate Thesis: Downloading music for free is equal to stealing.