

# *What, Why, and How?*

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## **THE WRITING PROCESS: Outlining**

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# WHAT IS OUTLINING?

Outlining is the road map for the essay. American writer Tom Wolfe said, “By writing an outline you really are writing in a way, because you’re creating the structure of what you’re going to do. Once I really know what I’m going to write, I don’t find the actual writing takes all that long.”

Critical thinkers use outlines to organize their ideas and check the organization of their drafts throughout the writing process. Outlines represent an important element of the writing process not only for English essays, but also for essays in history, philosophy, economics, political science, etc.

As the “road map” of the essay, outlines should do the following:

- Provide the thesis and most important details of the essay.
- Demonstrate a clear, logical organization of main ideas and supporting details.
- Include topic sentences but not *every* sentence in the essay/paragraphs.

# WHY OUTLINE?

Just like we need a road map when traveling to an unfamiliar destination, good writers create preliminary or rough outlines after they have generated enough ideas through prewriting to organize and develop their essays. Strong, thorough [prewriting](#) should develop more ideas than you can actually use in your essay so that you are able to select the most relevant and convincing ideas for your essay.

Once you have settled on a thesis statement and your main supporting ideas, you can write a formal outline, creating the “skeleton” of your essay. Looking at your ideas this way can help ensure that:

- Your main points are on-topic and directly support your thesis.
- Your main points are logically organized.
- Your most important ideas are emphasized and your less important ideas are subordinated.
- Your main points have sufficient and relevant supporting evidence.

Outlines also help writers:

- Make the writing process easier since you have a road map for your essay to follow.
- Break through writer’s block—for people who struggle with writer’s block, it helps to first set up a structure with lower stakes and less pressure.
- Save time writing your essay since you have a clear, focused plan to follow for your essay.
- Ensure each part of your essay relates to the essay prompt.

# HOW DO I DO IT?

- Put the thesis statement at the top: it should be polished and be a complete sentence.
- Use Roman numerals (I, II, III, IV, V, etc.) to indicate the main points/topic sentences which should be written in specific phrases or complete sentences (this is the “P” or Point of PIE).
- Use capital letters (A, B, C, D, E, etc.) for the major supporting details; typically, writers should have at least two main supporting details for each point/topic sentence (the “I” or information of PIE providing evidence and the “E” or explanation of PIE providing analysis).
- Use numbers (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc.) for sub-details clarifying and specifying your main supporting details.

Thesis:

- I. (Main Idea 1)
  - A. (Supporting Detail 1)
    - 1. Sub-detail 1
    - 2. Sub-detail 2
  - B. (Supporting Detail 2)
    - 1. Sub-detail 1
- II. (Main Idea 2)
  - A. (Supporting Detail 1)
    - 1. Sub-detail 1
    - 2. Sub-detail 2
  - B. (Supporting Detail 2)
    - 1. Sub-detail 1
    - 2. Sub-detail 2
- III. (Main Idea 3)
  - A. (Supporting Detail 1)
    - 1. Sub-detail 1
    - 2. Sub-detail 2
  - B. (Supporting Detail 2)
    - 1. Sub-detail 1
    - 2. Sub-detail 2
- IV. (Main Idea 4)
  - A. (Supporting Detail 1)
    - 1. Sub-detail 1
    - 2. Sub-detail 2
  - B. (Supporting Detail 2)
    - 1. Sub-detail 1
    - 2. Sub-detail 2

## Outline Organization

When deciding how to order your points, your first consideration should be logic. How does one point lead up to or build upon another? Here are some different ways to logically organize your points:

- **Climax:** Present your ideas so they build to a climax, ending with your most dramatic examples.
- **Complexity:** Start with simpler ideas and build to more complex ones.
- **Familiarity:** Start with more familiar ideas and move towards newer ones.
- **Audience appeal:** Start with “safe” ideas and move to more challenging ones.
- **Chronological:** Present ideas in the time order in which they occurred.
- **Compare/Contrast:** When looking at similarities or differences, it may be ordered in one of two

ways:

<p><b>Block style:</b> look first at one item and then the next, using the same criteria each time. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>I. Frederick Douglass<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>A. Philosophies</li><li>B. Activism</li><li>C. Accomplishments</li></ul></li><li>II. Martin Luther King, Jr.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>A. Philosophies</li><li>B. Activism</li><li>C. Accomplishments</li></ul></li></ul>	<p><b>Point-by-point:</b> Look at the two items simultaneously, comparing them using the same criteria. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>I. Philosophies<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>A. Frederick Douglass</li><li>B. Martin Luther King, Jr.</li></ul></li><li>II. Activism<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>A. Frederick Douglass</li><li>B. Martin Luther King, Jr.</li></ul></li><li>III. Accomplishments<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>A. Frederick Douglass</li><li>B. Martin Luther King, Jr.</li></ul></li></ul>
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## EXAMPLE

It can be difficult to create a formal outline without some help. Here is a first step towards creating a more formal outline. Use this template and answer the guiding questions. After, revise what you produce into a formal outline.

**THESIS:** *What do you want to convince your reader of? Is this an arguable assertion? Is this based on the reading? Can one disagree?*

Slaves like Douglass were controlled by not being able to read and write and this denial of education is still happening in the United States as well as other parts of the world.

### PARAGRAPH 1:

**TOPIC SENTENCE (Point/Topic):** *What is an arguable point I can make to prove my thesis?*

Slave-owners would not allow slaves to learn to read and write because they were afraid they would rebel.

**SUPPORT (Information/Evidence):** *What examples and quotes in the reading can I use to prove the claim in my topic sentence? Do I want to also include real life examples or research to strengthen my claim?*

From text: Mr. and Mrs. Hugh forbid Douglass to learn to read and write. Mrs. Hugh became furious if she would ever see him holding the paper (page 84).

Outside research: See if there were actual laws passed making it illegal to teach slaves to read and write.

**RELEVANCE (Explanation/Analysis):** *Why do I think this is important? What can be learned from this? What are the implications? Outcomes? Possible interpretations or deeper meaning?*

If you can't read, you won't know the laws that govern you so you won't know your rights. Also, you can't get a clear historical perspective so can't know what is just and reasonable and what is not.

### PARAGRAPH 2:

**TOPIC SENTENCE (Point/Topic):** *What is another arguable point I can make to prove my thesis? How can I smoothly transition from the point I made before?*

Learning to read caused Douglass unexpected pain as he better understood his own enslavement but it also set in motion his desire to create change and bring awareness to end slavery.

**SUPPORT (Information/Evidence):** *What examples and quotes in the reading can I use to prove the claim in my topic sentence? Do I want to also include real life examples or research to strengthen my claim?*

From text: Douglass speaks of his "unutterable anguish" (84) and how reading became a curse and that he wished he could return to the "stupidity" (84) of his fellow slaves.

Outside research: Research what Douglass later did after he escaped to the North and became an activist.

**RELEVANCE (Explanation/Analysis):** *Why do I think this is important? What can be learned from this? What are the implications? Outcomes? Possible interpretations or deeper meaning?*

Being able to read and write gives you the tools to call out oppression, gather other people to support making needed changes, and to liberate yourself and others from unfair institutions.

### **PARAGRAPH 3:**

**TOPIC SENTENCE (Point/Topic):** *What is another arguable point I can make to prove my thesis? How can I smoothly transition from the point I made before?*

Denying people equal access to education is happening today in places like rural Pakistan in the case of women.

**SUPPORT (Information/Evidence):** *What examples and quotes in the reading can I use to prove the claim in my topic sentence? Do I want to also include real life examples or research to strengthen my claim?*

Outside research: Muktar Mai in her memoir *In the Name of Honor* tells how women in her region were not allowed to be educated so when she was gang-raped, she could not write down her account at the police station so her story was changed and she lost her case in court. Later she learned to read and write and became a strong advocate for women's rights and started a school for girls in her village. Quote on poor treatment of women, page 46.

**RELEVANCE (Explanation/Analysis):** *Why do I think this is important? What can be learned from this? What are the implications? Outcomes? Possible interpretations or deeper meaning?*

Becoming literate helped Mai navigate the complex legal systems, bring international awareness of the plight of women in her region, and enabled her to help others.

### **CONCLUSION:**

*How can I end the essay on a strong note? What would be a good "so what?" that explains: So what can we learn from this? So what is the larger significance or impact?*

So what? The denying of certain groups an education didn't just happen long ago or far away. It is happening now in the United States with our inner-city schools which are underfunded and understaffed. With the high dropout rates, large numbers of blacks and Latinos are being denied equal access to education and literacy.

# PRACTICE

This is a template to help you on the first step towards making a formal outline. Adjust for how many body paragraphs you decide to include. **Please note:** If your instructor has asked you to create a formal outline, you are not going to turn in this template. This template is designed to help you generate and organize the ideas you can then put into a formal outline.

**THESIS:** *What do you want to convince your reader of? Is this an arguable assertion? Is this based on the reading? Can one disagree?*

## PARAGRAPH 1:

**TOPIC SENTENCE (Point/Topic):** *What is an arguable point I can make to prove my thesis?*

**SUPPORT (Information/Evidence):** *What examples and quotes in the reading can I use to prove the claim in my topic sentence? Do I want to also include real life examples or research to strengthen my claim?*

**RELEVANCE (Explanation/Analysis):** *Why do I think this is important? What can be learned from this? What are the implications? Outcomes? Possible interpretations or deeper meaning?*

## PARAGRAPH 2:

**TOPIC SENTENCE (Point/Topic):** *What is another arguable point I can make to prove my thesis? How can I smoothly transition from the point I made before?*

**SUPPORT (Information/Evidence):** *What examples and quotes in the reading can I use to prove the claim in my topic sentence? Do I want to also include real life examples or research to strengthen my claim?*

**RELEVANCE (Explanation/Analysis):** *Why do I think this is important? What can be learned from this? What are the implications? Outcomes? Possible interpretations or deeper meaning?*

### **PARAGRAPH 3:**

**TOPIC SENTENCE (Point/Topic):** *What is another arguable point I can make to prove my thesis? How can I smoothly transition from the point I made before?*

**SUPPORT (Information/Evidence):** *What examples and quotes in the reading can I use to prove the claim in my topic sentence? Do I want to also include real life examples or research to strengthen my claim?*

**RELEVANCE (Explanation/Analysis):** *Why do I think this is important? What can be learned from this? What are the implications? Outcomes? Possible interpretations or deeper meaning?*

### **PARAGRAPH 4:**

**TOPIC SENTENCE (Point/Topic):** *What is another arguable point I can make to prove my thesis? How can I smoothly transition from the point I made before?*

**SUPPORT (Information/Evidence):** *What examples and quotes in the reading can I use to prove the claim in my topic sentence? Do I want to also include real life examples or research to strengthen my claim?*

**RELEVANCE (Explanation/Analysis):** *Why do I think this is important? What can be learned from this? What are the implications? Outcomes? Possible interpretations or deeper meaning?*

### **CONCLUSION:**

*How can I end the essay on a strong note? What would be a good “so what?” that explains: So what can we learn from this? So what is the larger significance or impact?*



## EXAMPLE

### Sample formal outline on *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*:

**Thesis:** The control and limitations over reading and writing during slavery sought to make slaves like Douglass ignorant, powerless, and therefore more easily controlled, and this control over literacy and education is still happening in the world today.

#### Introduction

- A. Lead in with George Orwell quote: “Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.”
  - B. Compare to the band Rage Against the Machine and how they used Orwell’s warning.
  - C. Connect discussion of control to Fredrick Douglass and controlling slaves through denying them an education.
  - D. State thesis.
- I. In his narrative, Douglass exposes how being denied education was one of the main tactics used to keep so many blacks trapped within generations of enslavement.
    - A. Mr. and Mrs. Hugh forbid Douglass from learning to read and write.
      - 1) Mrs. Hugh became furious anytime she would catch Douglass reading.
      - 2) This shows their realization that educated people are harder to control.
    - B. Many slave states passed laws making it illegal to teach slaves to read and write.
      - 1) Use quote North Carolina law and list the punishments for breaking the law.
      - 2) This shows how to control people you have to do so not just physically but mentally.
  - II. Douglass discovered that freeing his mind led to anguished torment as he was unable to free himself from the entrenched institutions of slavery but change was set in motion.
    - A. Being awakened to the stark realities of his condition served to plunge Douglass into despair.
      - 1) Use quote showing how Master Hugh knew discontent would follow (page 84).
      - 2) Use quote showing Douglass’s anguish and despair as his eyes are opened (page 84).
    - B. Insert discussion of how ignorance is not bliss.
      - 1) Those who are ignorant get taken advantage of, they are powerless, are controlled by others.
      - 2) Douglass eventually gains power over his life from learning to read and becomes an activist fighting for the equality of blacks and women.
  - III. Unfortunately, when slavery was abolished in 1865, that did not end the practice of denying certain groups of people an education in order to control them, but it also did not end people’s ability to go against societal norms, educate themselves, and fight for change.
    - A. Muktar Mai, a poor rural woman in Pakistan, tells in her memoir *In the Name of Honor* how she was denied an education so when she was brutalized, she was helpless in the legal system.
    - B. Mai learned to read and write, pursued her attackers legally, brought national awareness to the plight of women in her country, started a school for girls, and also an organization that advocates for the rights of women.

**Conclusion:** Denial of education is happening now and closer to home in the U.S as inner-city schools are underfunded and understaffed so many of our youth are dropping out and are not given access to an equal education and this puts them in a powerless and invisible state.

# HOW CAN I CHECK AN OUTLINE?

## Outline Peer response

Answer questions like the following to evaluate your peer's outline as well as your own outline.

### 1. Thesis:

Does the thesis make a statement that can be argued? Ask yourself, **can I disagree?** If you cannot disagree (if the thesis just states a fact or what is already obvious and known), advise the author about how to **add an opinion.** Is the thesis specific (focused?) and clear enough? Is the thesis **based on the reading?** Also, is there a clear "**so what?**" So what is important about this? So what is the significance?

### 2. Supporting Points:

Does the outline list the supporting points in a **clear and logical order?** How can the order be clearer or improved? Does each supporting point **directly prove the thesis?** Are there any **additional supporting points** that should be included?

### 3. Evidence:

Is there a clear example illustrating each of the supporting points? Is the author using examples **from the reading?** If not, suggest ideas the author could use to better prove his/her points. Could the author **improve or replace** any of the supporting points or textual examples? Has the author developed a clear **explanation** of why each supporting point is relevant?

# PRACTICE

Using the guiding questions on Outline Peer Response, provide constructive feedback on the following outline on **Chapter VII in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass***:

**Thesis:** Slavery in the United States damaged many lives.

## Introduction

- A. Lead in with statistics on how many people in the U.S. were enslaved.
  - B. Connect to how Mrs. Hugh changed for the worse and how Fredrick Douglass felt despair.
  - C. State thesis.
- 
- I. Douglass taught himself to read and write even though he was forbidden to do so.
    - A. At first Mrs. Hugh was teaching him to read but she changed her mind.
      - 1) Her husband told her not to teach him.
      - 2) She became harsher than her husband is stopping Douglass from learning.
    - B. Douglass got the young poor white boys in his neighborhood to teach him.
      - 1) He took a book with him on errands to use.
      - 2) He bribed the boys with bread.
  - II. Slavery changed people
    - A. Mrs. Hugh was once a kind woman and then she became cruel and inhumane because of slavery.
      - 3) She used to be charitable
      - 4) She became mean
    - B. Douglass became anguished and trapped in slavery and even considered suicide.
      - 1) The more he read, the more miserable he became.
      - 2) Douglass fought for the rights of others

**Conclusion:** Slavery hurt a lot of people and ruined many lives.

# EXAMPLE

A sample of outline peer response on the Douglass outline:

## 1. Thesis:

Does the thesis make a statement that can be argued? Ask yourself, **can I disagree?** If you cannot disagree (if the thesis just states a fact or what is already obvious and known), advise the author about how to **add an opinion**. Is the thesis specific (focused?) and clear enough? Is the thesis **based on the reading?** Also, is there a clear **“so what?”** So what is important about this? So what is the significance?

Thesis: Slavery in the United States damaged many lives.

*I like where you are going with this but this statement is very general. Whose lives exactly were damaged? The story talks about how it hurt Douglass and also his slave masters so perhaps be more specific and say who you mean. Also, how were they damaged? So what can we learn from this? It seems like this is telling us something about abuse of power. Is this a lesson that we should apply to any situations today? Lastly, in the outline, you say you are going to lead up to the thesis by including statistics on how many people were enslaved but you might want to connect this to your argument about being damaged.*

## 2. Supporting Points:

Does the outline list the supporting points in a **clear and logical order?** How can the order be clearer or improved? Does each supporting point **directly prove the thesis?** Are there any **additional supporting points** that should be included?

*This entire second point summarizes how Douglass learned to read but it's not clear how this connects to the argument about people being damaged by slavery. I'd remove this. Section three is good as it directly connects to your thesis about being damaged by slavery. The topic sentence is a bit general though. You say: "Slavery changed people." How did it change people? For better or worse? Also, you discuss how it changed Mrs. Hugh, the slave master, first and then you discuss how it changed Douglass after that. I think it would make more sense to discuss Douglass first because he is the one obviously damaged by slavery. Then after that you can present Mrs. Hugh, the less obvious one who is also harmed by slavery. Finally, the conclusion just repeats your thesis.*

## 3. Evidence:

Is there a clear example illustrating each of the supporting points? Is the author using examples **from the reading?** If not, suggest ideas the author could use to better prove his/her points. Could the author **improve or replace** any of the supporting points or textual examples? Has the author developed a clear **explanation** of why each supporting point is relevant?

*You show how Douglass and Mrs. Hugh were damaged by slavery but I think you could include a separate more developed section for each and include quotes from the text too. Douglass makes some strong statements about how he wishes he could lose his humanity and become an unthinking beast instead. You can also use the descriptions of how Mrs. Hugh's kindness turned to "tiger-like fierceness." Then include your own analysis of why it's important to see how these two were changed? So what does this reveal about people and having this much power over others?*

## EXAMPLE

Here's an example of providing feedback directly on the outline.

**Thesis:** Slavery in the United States damaged many lives.

Thesis feedback: This statement is very general. Whose lives exactly were damaged? How? So what?

I like the idea of including statistics but how does this connect to the argument about being damaged?

### Introduction

- A. Lead in with statistics on how many people in the U.S. were enslaved.
- B. Connect to how Mrs. Hugh changed for the worse and how Fredrick Douglass felt despair.
- C. State thesis.

### I. Douglass taught himself to read and write even though he was forbidden to do so.

- A. At first Mrs. Hugh was teaching him to read but she changed her mind.
  - 1) Her husband told her not to teach him.
  - 2) She became harsher than her husband is stopping Douglass from learning.
- B. Douglass got the young poor white boys in his neighborhood to teach him.
  - 1) He took a book with him on errands to use.
  - 2) He bribed the boys with bread.

This entire second point summarizes how Douglass learned to read but it's not clear how this connects to the argument about people being damaged by slavery. I'd remove this.

### II. Slavery changed people.

- A. Mrs. Hugh was once a kind woman and then she became cruel and inhumane because of slavery.
  - 5) She used to be charitable.
  - 6) She became mean.
- B. Douglass became anguished as he sees how he is trapped in slavery and even considered suicide.
  - 1) The more he read, the more miserable he became.
  - 2) Douglass fought for the rights of others.

Good, section three directly connects to your thesis about being damaged by slavery. The topic sentence is a bit general though. How did it "change" people? For better or worse? Then you show how Douglass and Mrs. Hugh were damaged but I think you could include a separate more developed section for each and include quotes from the text too. You could also include your own analysis of why it's important to see how these two were changed? So what does this reveal?

**Conclusion:** Slavery hurt a lot of people and ruined many lives.

It's good you stay on topic but this just repeats your thesis. In your conclusion, you want a larger "so what?" So what can we learn by realizing that both the enslaved and the enslavers were hurt by slavery? Can we apply this lesson elsewhere? Is this a danger now in a less obvious form that we should be concerned about? Are those who have unchecked power over others always harmed by it?

## EXAMPLE

Here's a potential revision of the outline based on the feedback received:

Originally the thesis said slavery damaged "many" lives. Now it states who (slaves and slave-owners), how (damaged psyches and destroyed humanity), and so what (unchecked power corrupts)

**Thesis:** Douglass's narrative reveals how slavery in the U.S. not only damaged the psyche of the slaves but destroyed the humanity of the slave owners showing how no human being should ever have unchecked power over another as it inevitably leads to corruption.

### Introduction

- A. Lead in with statistics on how many people in the U.S. were enslaved and connect to how many families this means were separated and destroyed and how many people were maimed, raped and murdered.
  - B. Introduce the idea of how absolute power corrupts absolutely.
  - C. Connect to how Fredrick Douglass felt despair and Mrs. Hugh changed for the worse.
  - D. State thesis.
- I. Slavery slowly destroyed Douglass's psychological well-being.
    - A. Douglass who is highly intelligent and motivated is held back by slavery.
      - 1) He is eager to learn but is unjustly forbidden by his slave-masters.
      - 2) He has to settle for an inferior, secretive education learning from young white kids between his errands.
      - 3) Speculate on the incredible loss of potential of someone this motivated and intelligent denied during his formative years. Connect to all the lost potential of poor kids in bad schools today.
    - B. Douglass became anguished as he sees how he is trapped in slavery and even considered suicide.
      - 1) Douglass comes to see something as potentially liberating as education as something destructive "I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing" (84).
      - 2) As time goes on, Douglass feels only more anguish and despair and even wishes his own humanity were taken away, "I have often wished myself a beast" (84).
  - II. Slavery also destroyed the humanity of Mrs. Hugh who was once kind became cruel.
    - A. Mrs. Hugh was once a kind woman: "she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear" (82).
    - B. Slavery made her a despicable person: "Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness" (82).
    - C. Examine how absolute power corrupts and cite other examples in history (Hitler, Stalin) when this has been true.

The reasoning behind the statistics is now clearly connects to the damage caused. Then adding the corrupting influence of power now introduces the second part of the thesis about slave-owners being corrupted too. And now the order has been changed to talk about Douglass first (the obvious one damaged) and then the less obvious, the slave-owners.

More detail, quotes and "so what?" analysis has been added to the discussions of Douglass and Mrs. Hugh.

**Conclusion:** We must be aware of any case when a person or group is allowed too much power over another group as this will lead to a corrupt and an unhealthy society. Examine how this is happening with corporations globally today who act in their own interest for profit and we all suffer as a result.

A larger "so what?" has been added looking at how this lesson can be applied today.