



How to Outline a Paper

So, let's say you get handed a prompt for a thesis-driven paper on Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." The first step in drafting a paper is to create an outline, a tool that can organize your thoughts, for your rough draft. But how do you make a good outline?

Here are a few simple steps!

Step 1:

Dissect the prompt your professor gives you. What are the questions they want you to answer? What are the focus points? What characteristics make a good paper? Highlight these.

Example of a prompt you might encounter:

Martin Luther King defends his use of nonviolent protest in opposing segregation of black people to his critics, white clergymen, in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Analyze in a thesis-driven paper what writing elements support his argument and what rhetorical strategies he employs. For instance, how does the tone support the argument? Metaphors? Allusions? What ethos does he convey and how does that further his argument? Pathos? Logos?

Step 2:

Place those same focus points on your outline as headings or, in other words, topics to explore in your outline.

Example:

Rhetorical Strategies:

1. Tone
2. Metaphors
3. Allusions
4. Ethos
5. Pathos
6. Logos

Step 3:

Now you can find sub-headings (areas that you can elaborate on) that will lead you to discovering your thesis and the rest of the paper with it. The best place to find these are in—you guessed it—the prompt! Now let's go back to one of those headings and see what subheadings we can come up with.

Example:

Rhetorical Strategies

1. Tone

- a. Examples?
- b. Effect on argument?

Step 4:

Doing the same for the rest of your headings will help leave yourself clues to revisit the text and discover new ideas. But you can't just list headings and sub-headings and call it a day. You have to write down your basic ideas and answers for each sub-heading. This helps develop an organized map of your paper going into your rough draft. So if you need examples as part of your outline, write those examples down and cite them. If you need to understand what effect an example has on the argument, write it down. Even if it isn't all of your thoughts on the subject or completely researched yet, your rough draft will be that more focused because of writing down your ideas.

Example:

Rhetorical Strategies

1. Tone

- a. Examples?
 - i. Sincerity: "But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statements in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms" (King 1).
- b. Effect on argument?
 - i. Shows that King holds his audience, white clergymen, in respect, which helps his audience to be more inclined to listen to his argument. It also establishes King as an honest man.

Step 5:

Celebrate! You just took the biggest step in the prewriting page and you're that much closer to completing that essay!