



## Help With: Outlining Papers

There is no correct format for planning an academic paper. Visually-oriented people may prefer to use circles or color highlighters. Mathematical people may use flowcharts. But a formal outline usually takes the following organizational form:

### *Introductory Paragraph*

Your paper must be about something, and this is the place to set out your subject (what the paper is about) and your angle (what aspect of the subject you are specifically writing about). A useful strategy is to divide your paper into three sections:

- Subject: Sports cars. Angle: Learning to drive.
- Topic 1: Expensive. Topic 2: Exciting. Topic 3: Dangerous.

Thesis statement: Learning to drive a sports car can be expensive, exciting, and dangerous.

Some people prefer to put the thesis at the end of the first paragraph, and others have a more journalistic style and place it at the very beginning to make an impact. Often the paper subject will help you make this decision.

This paragraph may contain necessary background information to explain the subject. If you find that the introduction is getting too long, you might spin off the background information into a second explanatory paragraph before beginning the body section.

### *Body Paragraphs*

Each body paragraph will usually have these three elements:

- A sentence introducing the paragraph's topic
- Supporting information, evidence, examples, or quotations
- A conclusion relating the information back to the topic

Obviously, if your paper is ten pages you need more than three body paragraphs. Try not to think of each section as one paragraph. For each topic you might have multiple paragraphs. In a long paper you might even divide each section into its own group of sub-sections:

Topic 3: Learning to drive a sports car can be dangerous

- a. Danger to the driver
- b. Danger to the passenger
- c. Danger to other drivers or pedestrians

### *Concluding Paragraph*

- A synthesis or restatement of your thesis and topics
- Do not introduce new evidence
- A statement of closure at the end

Planning such a short paper about sports cars might seem a waste of time. It's when your papers get longer and more intricate that the skill of outlining becomes obvious. Without a map to organize and structure your ideas, you can find yourself running out of things to say or with the awful realization that you've repeated yourself.