

The Portable Editor

Tips for Improving Your Writing

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This month's issue focuses on using outlines to improve the logical organization of your writing. If you think of writing a paper as painting your house, the "big picture" can be overwhelming and frustrating. However, developing a strategic plan for tackling the job breaks the daunting task into manageable parts. Creating an outline can help guide both your research and your writing. Using an outline to guide your writing will improve your final paper by helping you organize your information in a logical manner, maintain a consistent focus, and ensure all critical elements are included in the paper.

There are several ways to approach your paper:

- Use the syllabus as an outline
Variation: Use the grading rubric as an outline
- Do research, then create outline
Variation: Create Reference section first
- Create outline, then do research

Approach 1: Using the Syllabus to Create Outline

The course syllabus often provides a basic outline for the paper.

Example: Experience assignment: Attend a support group.

Assignment from the syllabus: "Your paper should review the experience, relate the experience to course concepts, provide your personal reaction, and examine the implications (using at least three scholarly sources)."

One possibility for organizing your paper is to use the syllabus description as a guideline.

- ⊙ **I. Introduction**
 - > Statement of the topic—*Support groups are a frequently used treatment approach primarily based on anecdotal evidence rather than empirical evidence of effectiveness.*
 - > Thesis (**must be a debatable point**)—*Support groups are most effective with long-term treatment approaches; support groups are counter-productive in brief, time-limited treatment approaches.*
- ⊙ **II. Review of Experience**
 - > Demographics
 - > Organization/process
- ⊙ **III. Course Concepts**
 - > Take a key course concept and use your experience to illustrate/analyze this concept
 - > Take another concept and repeat
 - > Take another concept and repeat
- ⊙ **IV. Personal Reaction**
 - > What was the experience like?
 - > How will experience influence your work?

- > What did you learn?
- V. Implications
 - Look at one specific area; You might answer, "In what ways do support groups influence treatment duration?"
 - Outline what information you need to fully address the question; Do needed research
- VI. Conclusion
 - > Restate thesis and major points

Approach 2: Research First; Then Create Outline to Organize Thoughts and Data

1. Collect all of your research.
2. Start reading and organizing your research (for example: "Articles 3 and 5 address the history; Articles 1, 2, and 4 address theoretical foundation" and so on).
3. Narrow the focus of your paper and define your **thesis** (i.e., the point you will try to prove or perspective you will try to persuade reader to accept as valid).
4. Do a basic run-through of collected sources; discard any that go beyond your focus
5. Make brief notes on the articles
6. Use your notes to create an outline for the paper
7. Create a draft of your Reference section

Remember: Every Reference entry must be cited in the text. You must cite all works that have contributed to your knowledge or have influenced your thinking and perspective on a topic.

Approach 3: Outline First; Use Outline to Guide Research and to Streamline Writing Process

Already familiar with the topic? You may be able to create your outline first and use the outline to guide additional research.

Suppose you're writing a paper on the speech Robert F. Kennedy gave addressing the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Even if you know only basic facts, you can create a rough outline for the paper.

- I. Introduction*
 - > give broad historical context of the event;
 - > introduce what is to come in the paper;
 - > clearly state thesis
- II. Robert Kennedy-background about RFK
 - > A. Kennedy family's prominence in American politics and public service
 - > B. Brief look at Robert Kennedy's professional history
 - > C. How RFK was viewed in 1968 as a result of brother's assassination
 - Influence on RFK's 1968 presidential campaign
 - > D. What RFK was doing the night he gave the address

- III. Martin Luther King, Jr.-background about MLK
 - > A. Overview of the political/social climate in MLK's time
 - > B. Look at the highlights of MLK's career
 - > C. Popular view (s) of MLK at the time of his assassination
- IV. The Speech
 - > Who, what, when, where, why, how ,and reaction
- V. How the Speech Worked
 - > Pull in rhetorical concepts and offer an analysis
 - Burke's Pentad
 - Ethos, Pathos, Logos
 - Exigency
- VI. What Narrative the Speech Offered
- VII. Conclusion

***Note: Remember, APA does not include Introduction header in the final paper!**

Although basic, this outline is useful for guiding the writer's research. Looking at the second main point, the writer recognizes that she will need to do additional research to find sources about (a) Kennedy's 1968 presidential campaign, (b) his professional history, and (c) prevailing public opinions about RFK in 1968. In addition, even though the writer knows the Kennedys have been a prominent family in American politics, she will need to find sources to support that claim. As the writer conducts her research, she can flesh out the outline by adding details.

MORE tips for creating outlines using Post-It notes, index cards, electronic outlines, and diagram outlines are included in the 2011 PowerPoint presentation "[Organization and Outlines](#)" available at <http://ssw.unc.edu/students/writing>

Need Writing Support??

Contact the Writing Support Team (Diane, Susan, and Cindy), e-mail:

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Great Opportunity! Great Writing Workshop!

Duke's Office of Research Support is sponsoring Dr. George Gopen's workshop, "**Writing from the Reader's Perspective.**" Gopen's approach to making scientific writing (articles, grants, papers, textbooks) readable is based on the concept that readers have fixed expectations of how writing should be structured, how certain words are used, or where certain grammatical constructions will appear in text. By bringing these intuitive reading processes to conscious thought, Gopen provides writers with the tools for understanding how readers interact with the structure of writing—ranging from punctuation marks to sentences to paragraphs—and how meaning and purpose are communicated through structure. This workshop is open to UNC students, faculty, and staff. The series of four 3-hour workshops is only \$20 (typically a \$200 workshop!) For more information, see <http://www.ors.duke.edu/event/writing-readers-perspective-george-gopen-february-2011>