Creating an outline is a crucial part of the writing process. However formal or informal, an outline helps you see the big picture and how all the ideas and details fit before you start writing. It is also useful while you write: use the outline as a map or checklist to keep track of your ideas and avoid wandering off topic. You can also come back to your outline when you’re done writing to make sure you stayed true to the plan. You might even create a reverse outline, noting what each paragraph of a draft says and does, and compare that to the original outline. Of course, outlines are flexible: if you discover new ideas or find that a different order makes more sense, you’re free to make changes.

Start your outline with your controlling idea — your thesis statement. A thesis statement in your introduction focuses the reader’s attention and concisely establishes your purpose and position in argumentative or persuasive writing. Breaking the statement down into its supporting ideas in the following paragraphs leads readers step-by-step through your analysis and evidence for the argument.

This outline worksheet follows a hierarchy of three parts:

I. Point: one specific building block of your thesis statement
   A. Evidence: one observation, detail from the text, or expert opinion that support this idea
      i. Explanation: how that piece of evidence supports the large idea

Use the sample outline on the back of this sheet as a starting point for this structure. If you need to, start with a more informal list of ideas, then go back and fill in the details afterwards. You can add as many points as you need and as much evidence as you can find — especially when you’re first outlining an essay. You can always remove anything repetitive or unnecessary later. Just be sure to include at least one piece of evidence for each point and an explanation for every piece of evidence to make sure all content connects to your central argument and all claims are fully supported.

The more detail you put into your outline, the easier it is to write the essay, so try to write in full sentences. If you do this, your points can later become topic sentences: the first sentence of each paragraph, which tells readers what you’re talking about and guides us from one idea to the next. Outlining with full sentences also makes it easier to introduce the evidence that supports each point and to explain your line of thought to your reader.