



# Brainstorming and Outlining

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*The MWC is a Writing Across the Curriculum initiative serving Northwest Vista College students, faculty, and the community through tutoring in writing skills, critical thinking, and building writing pedagogy. Effective writing is a cornerstone of education.*

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## Why Should You Plan Your Essay?

Although it may seem tedious or time-consuming, taking the time to brainstorm and make an outline for an essay can help to make the writing process more efficient. By planning your essay's organization and main points in an outline, you can ensure that your essay will be structured correctly and answer the prompt as effectively as possible. Creating an outline is an easy way to take your writing to a whole new level – all while keeping yourself organized.

## Understanding What's Being Asked:

The first step in developing an outline for an essay is to understand the given prompt. Whether the prompt asks you to create an argument, develop research, or evaluate information, it's important to understand the main point that your essay should get across to your audience before jumping in. There are many ways that you can break down a prompt including:

- Read it multiple times
- Look for keywords such as: Explain, Synthesize, Research, Evaluate, Argue
- Identify the type of essay: Research, Report, or Argument

*\*\* See our Understanding an Essay Prompt booklet for more details on these essay types\*\**

## Brainstorming:

After you understand what's being asked in the assignment, it's time to brainstorm your response. When brainstorming, it's important to establish what you know and try to develop a simple answer to the prompt which you can later expand on. For example, in an essay that asks you to identify three causes of the Civil War, it would be important to make sure that you understand concepts like who fought in

the Civil War and when it took place before trying to find causes of it. Once you understand the topic, you can delve deeper to develop an answer to the specific prompt.

There's no one way to brainstorm, so feel free to try out different techniques such as making notes, researching the topic, and looking at subject material from class. Try to narrow down your ideas to one that effectively answers the prompt, and which can be supported by your research.

### **Following Basic Essay Structure in an Outline:**

All three types of essays – Research, Report, and Argument – tend to follow the same essay structure consisting of three main parts: the introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion.

In an outline, these sections don't need to be written out fully and can be in whatever form you find helpful, e.g., bullet points, keywords, quotes from sources, etc.

### **Outlining an Introduction:**

The introduction is vital in establishing the parameters of what will be discussed in the rest of the essay. It consists primarily of context or background information on your topic and a thesis statement that sums up your response to the prompt.

*\*\*See our Thesis Statement booklet for more details\*\**

When creating an outline, it's up to you to decide how much information should be written down in your planning; so, when outlining the introduction, you may decide to only write down the main thesis for your paper. However, it may be helpful to write down any notes or ideas you have for the main bulk of the paragraph – in this case, the background information. These ideas don't have to be fully formed and can be added in with simple bullet points.

## **Example:**

A Psychology essay prompt might ask, “Explain three main differences between the behavioral and biological perspectives of Psychology.” Your introduction outline may look like this:

- **Background information:**

Define behavioral perspectives and biological perspectives of Psychology.

Give an example of how/why these perspectives are studied.

- **Thesis:**

Three main differences between behavioral and biological perspectives are \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.

## **Outlining Body Paragraphs:**

Body paragraphs are used in academic essays to provide evidence and/or details of your chosen thesis. In most cases, it’s recommended that you have around three main points which support your thesis. These points are explained in separate paragraphs and should build upon each other as the essay progresses.