



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

## Making an Outline from the Top Down

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So you have to write an essay? Where do you start? Developing an outline is one of the best places to start. Doing an outline before you write your paper helps you make sure that your essay is organized and that the content is okay. An outline also saves time. If you write without an outline, you often end up changing direction as you write. Then you have a lot of revising to do to get back on track. However, if you think through an outline before you start, you generally have a stronger paper which needs less revision and so takes less time to write.

This handout shows you how to make a simple essay outline from the top down. “From the top down” means that you start with a topic for your essay and then build in the supporting ideas below it. This handout uses very simple content to show you a process you can use in developing ideas for your own essays.

- 1) THESIS:** The very first step in writing your essay is to create a thesis statement.  
(For more information on thesis development, see handout WR4.20, *The Thesis: Four Requirements*)

Here’s a simple example of how you might do this:

General Subject: Pets

Question you’d like to answer: What animal makes a good pet?

Thesis: Cats are excellent pets.

Once you have your thesis statement, think of a number of **reasons** why (how, what, etc.) this is true. **(Back it up!)**

1. They are independent
2. They are loving
3. They can reduce stress

Now let’s put it all together; your complete thesis statement is:

Cats make excellent pets because they are independent, loving, and relaxing.

## 2) OUTLINE:

**THESIS:** Cats make excellent pets because they are independent, loving, and relaxing.

(Your thesis statement will become the last sentence of your introduction paragraph and will be restated in the first sentence of your conclusion.)

### **THE BODY:**

**(Use each of your reasons as the topic sentence for a separate body paragraph.)**

PARA 1) Cats require little care because they are independent pets.

**(Now ask yourself how this point relates to your thesis: Why does being independent make cats excellent pets?)**

- a) can go away for the weekend and the cat is fine by itself  
**(Back it up with specific details!)**
  - just have to leave food and water for it  
**(Why/how else does being independent make cats excellent pets?)**
- b) don't have to take it for a walk
  - get their exercise by hunting birds
- c) don't need a bath  
**(Back it up. Can you be more specific? Ask yourself who, why, when, where, what, or how.)**
  - lick themselves clean

PARA 2) Cats are loving.

**(How does being loving make cats excellent pets?)**

- a) keep you company  
**(Back it up.)**

A cat may curl up on your stomach while you are watching TV.  
**(Use sources to back up your own thoughts.)**

  - "The companionship between a cat and its owner is a grand thing." (Brown, James "I'm not Alone" 1979, p. 23)
- b) Makes the owner feel special
  - old age homes introduce pets to give the patients a companion to love, who will always love them back.

PARA 3) Cats can reduce stress.

**(How does this relate to your thesis statement? How/why/when does reducing stress make cats excellent pets.)**

- a) The purring is soothing
  - Like listening to your favorite CD
- b) Owner doesn't have to worry about the pet
  - cat is happy being alone
  - (Use sources to back up your own thoughts)**
    - "While monitoring the stress levels in 50 cats, Dr. Wong found no significant difference when the cats were left by themselves for the weekend"  
(Hanna, 2002, p. 47)
    - only have to make sure they have food and water and a clean litter box
- c) "Cats have been found to reduce stress in both children and adults " (National Pet Magazine, 1999, p.18)

## **When writing your outline, remember to:**

### **- KEEP IT SIMPLE**

It is much easier to check that your essay is organized properly if all points are short. You can always combine points and change your wording later as you write your essay. Write out full sentences only for the thesis and topic sentences. For the rest, just make notes. Don't worry about grammar or spelling at the outlining stage.

### **- STAY ON TRACK**

Outlines allow you to easily see if all your points are organized and relevant. To do this, check that each point in your outline clearly supports your thesis statement.

### **- BACK IT UP**

When you make your outline, you need to consider whether you have included enough specific evidence to support your ideas. This evidence can include specific facts, quotes from experts, statistics and logical reasoning. Always ask yourself why, how, what, when, where, and who. The more specific your evidence is, the better your essay is.

For more help with essay structure, see Learning Centre handout WR4.30, *The Essay*.