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**Bratislava, Slovakia**

ACADEMIC WRITING GUIDE



**22001100**



**A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing Academic Papers**

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**Table of Contents**



[**Why Academic Writing ............................................................................ 2**](#_page2_x69.00_y72.68) [**The Writing Process ................................................................................ 4**](#_page4_x69.00_y247.68) [**Choosing and Narrowing a Topic ............................................................. 4**](#_page4_x69.00_y582.68) [**Thinking (Brainstorming)........................................................................ 6**](#_page6_x69.00_y363.68) [**Doing Research ....................................................................................... 6**](#_page6_x69.00_y483.68) [**Thesis Statement .................................................................................... 7**](#_page7_x69.00_y84.68) [**Planning – Basic Outline ......................................................................... 7**](#_page7_x69.00_y448.68) [**Planning – Taking Notes ......................................................................... 9**](#_page9_x69.00_y388.68) [**Planning – Detailed Outline ................................................................... 10**](#_page10_x69.00_y386.68) [**Writing the First Draft ........................................................................... 13**](#_page13_x69.00_y72.68) [**The Introduction ................................................................................... 13**](#_page13_x69.00_y374.68) [**Body Paragraphs ................................................................................... 14**](#_page14_x69.00_y424.68) [**The Conclusion ...................................................................................... 15**](#_page15_x69.00_y660.68) [**Connection between Ideas .................................................................... 16**](#_page16_x69.00_y506.68) [**Revising ................................................................................................ 17**](#_page17_x69.00_y560.68) [**Editing .................................................................................................. 18**](#_page18_x69.00_y509.68) [**Proofreading ......................................................................................... 19**](#_page19_x69.00_y651.68) [**Paper Checklist ..................................................................................... 20**](#_page20_x69.00_y278.68) [**Example Paper ...................................................................................... 21**](#_page21_x69.00_y83.68) [**Bibliography .......................................................................................... 28**](#_page28_x69.00_y72.68)

**Why Academic Writing**



Academic writing is, essentially, the writing you have to do for your university courses. Your instructors may have different names for academic writing assignments (essay, paper, research paper, term paper, argumentative paper/essay, analysis paper/essay, informative essay, position paper), but all of these assignments have the same goal and principles.

**Goal of Academic Writing: Why do students have to write papers?**

The truth is that academic papers are a specially-designed torture instrument. They are preferred because instructors are not directly involved in the torture. Usually students torture themselves by waiting until the last minute to write their papers and by not knowing what they are doing.

That's why this guide was written. A paper is not supposed to be torture. Seriously. The thing about torture was a joke. An academic writing assignment is supposed to be your opportunity to explore something that interests you from your course. You have freedom to choose a topic, empty pages on which to express your own ideas, and an audience that is interested in reading what you think.

In an academic writing assignment, you will start by asking a good question, then find and analyze answers to it, and choose your own best answer(s) to discuss in your paper. Your paper will share your thoughts and findings and justify your answer with logic and evidence. So the goal of academic writing is not to show off everything that you know about your topic, but rather to show that you understand and can think critically about your topic (and this is what earns you a good grade).

Plus, you will develop skills in researching, evaluating information, organizing, arguing, responding to others’ arguments, analyzing, and expressing yourself clearly in writing (in English too). These skills, by the way, are all valued by employers.

**10 Principles of Academic Writing**

* **Clear Purpose.** The goal of your paper is to answer the question you posed as your topic. Your question gives you a purpose. The most common purposes in academic writing are to persuade, analyze/synthesize, and inform.
* **Persuasive purpose** – In persuasive academic writing, the purpose is to get your readers to adopt your answer to the question. So you will choose one answer to your question, support your answer using reason and evidence, and try to change the readers’ point of view about the topic. Persuasive writing assignments include argumentative and position papers.
* **Analytical purpose** – In analytical academic writing, the purpose is to explain and evaluate possible answers to your question, choosing the best answer(s) based on your own criteria. Analytical assignments often investigate causes, examine effects, evaluate effectiveness, assess ways to solve problems, find the relationships between various ideas, or analyze other people’s arguments. The “synthesis” part of the purpose comes in when you put together all the parts and come up with your own answer to the question. Examples of these assignments include analysis papers and critical analyses.
* **Informative purpose** – In informative academic writing, the purpose is to explain possible answers to your question, giving the readers new information about your topic. This differs from an analytical topic in that you do not push your viewpoint on the readers, but rather try to enlarge the readers’ view.

Some assignments will have a pre-determined purpose (see the examples above); for other assignments, you will have to choose a purpose when you choose a topic (research paper, term paper). And some assignments may have two purposes. In all cases, the purpose will be clear at the beginning of your paper, and your paper must achieve its purpose in order to be successful.

* **Audience Engagement.** As with all writing, academic writing is directed to a specific audience in mind. Unless your instructor says otherwise, consider your audience to be fellow students with the same level of knowledge as yourself. As students in the field, they are interested in your topic, but perhaps not so interested in reading a paper. So you will have to engage them with your ideas and catch their interest with your writing style. Imagine that they are also skeptical, so that you must use the appropriate reasoning and evidence to convince them of your ideas.
* **Clear Point of View*.*** Academic writing, even that with an informative purpose, is not just a list of facts or summaries of sources. Although you will present other people’s ideas and research, the goal of your paper is to show what you think about these things. Your paper will have and support your own original idea about the topic. This is called the thesis statement, and it is your answer to the question.
* **Single Focus.** Every paragraph (even every sentence) in your paper will support your thesis statement. There will be no unnecessary, irrelevant, unimportant, or contradictory information (Your paper will likely include contradictory or alternative points of view, but you will respond to and critique them to further strengthen your own point of view).
* **Logical Organization*.*** Academic writing follows a standard organizational pattern. For academic essays and papers, there is an introduction, body, and conclusion. Each paragraph logically leads to the next one.
* The **introduction** catches the readers’ attention, provides background information, and lets the reader know what to expect. It also has the thesis statement.
* The **body** **paragraphs** support the thesis statement. Each body paragraph has one main point to support the thesis, which is named in a topic sentence. Each point is then supported in the paragraph with logical reasoning and evidence. Each sentence connects to the one before and after it. The readers do not have to work to find the connection between ideas.
* The **conclusion** summarizes the paper’s thesis and main points and shows the reader the significance of the paper’s findings.
* **Strong Support*.*** Each body paragraph will have sufficient and relevant support for the topic sentence and thesis statement. This support will consist of facts, examples, description, personal experience, and expert opinions and quotations.
* **Clear and Complete Explanations*.*** This is very important! As the writer, you need to do all the work for the reader. The reader should not have to think hard to understand your ideas, logic, or organization. English readers expect everything to be done for them; your thoughts and thought processes should be clearly and completely explained.
* **Effective Use of Research*.*** Your paper should refer to a variety of current, high- quality, professional and academic sources. You will use your research to support your own ideas; therefore, it must be integrated into your writing and not presented separately. That means that source material will be introduced, analyzed, explained, and then cited. *Research and APA Style Guide 2010* covers this topic in depth.
* **Correct APA Style*.*** All academic papers should follow the guidelines of the American Psychological Association as found in *Research and APA Style Guide 2010*, regarding

in-text citations, the reference list, and format.

* **Writing Style.** Because this is your work, you should use your own words whenever possible. Do not try to write like a boring, overly formal scholarly article. Use the natural conversational style that you would use in the classroom. Your writing should be clear, concise, and easy to read. It is also very important that there are no grammar, spelling, punctuation, or vocabulary mistakes in academic writing. Errors convey to the reader that you do not care.

And finally, this rule will override all the principles:

* **ALWAYS FOLLOW THE DIRECTIONS OF YOUR INSTRUCTOR.** Every instructor has a reason for giving you an assignment, and each instructor's requirements may differ. Follow your instructor’s directions to get the most from an assignment.

**The Writing Process**



You’ve just received your first academic writing assignment. What do you do? If you are a beginning writer, take it step by step. The following writing process has worked for millions of university students.

* **Choose a topic.**
* **Think (brainstorm).**
* **Research.**
* **Discover your thesis.** 
  + **Plan (outline).**
* **Write.**
* **Revise.**
* **Edit.**
* **Proofread.**

This guide will go through each of these steps with you. Beginning writers should follow this process. However, as you become more experienced, you may find that a different order works best for you. That is OK. You will also find that you have to do some steps more than once; for example, you may do research before you choose a topic, as you outline, and as you revise. You will certainly need to revise your paper several times before doing the final proofreading. And of course, you should never stop thinking.

**Choosing and Narrowing a Topic**



Sometimes your instructor will give you a list of possible questions or themes, and other times you will have the freedom to choose your own topic. Sometimes the assignment will have a specific purpose (argumentative essay, analysis paper), and other times you will have the freedom to determine the purpose (research paper, term paper). This freedom can be both great and terrifying. If you have trouble choosing what to write about, start with a few ideas and choose the best one after several steps. You can also consult with your instructor about the best topic choice.

**How to Choose a Topic**

Think about things related to the course that you are interested in. If there is nothing which interests you, look through the textbook, instructor-recommended resources, course slides, handouts, and current periodicals for possible ideas.

Then you need to narrow your ideas from subjects to topics. A subject is a broad concept: conflict management, abortion, the Cold War, capital budgeting, organizational culture, global warming, Toyota’s management style, and EU agricultural subsidies are a few examples. These are not paper topics; these could all be the subjects of books.

Narrow a subject by looking at its smaller parts, or by choosing a specific problem, time period, or place to cover. You may need to do a little general research here if you do not know much about the subject. Also asking yourself “Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How?” questions about the subject can help you limit the subject and determine your interests.

Doing this with abortion, for example, leads to topics like the reasons American women choose abortion rather than adoption, the psychological effects of previous abortions on women who become pregnant again, the consequences of Poland’s ban on abortions on Polish women’s lives, solutions to ending the practice of using abortion as a tool for gender selection in India, and whether or not the morning after pill should be sold to girls under 16. From here, choose a topic which fits the prescribed purpose of your paper (if there is one).

Specific topics like these are much more likely to fit the goal of academic writing and to fit the number of pages allowed in your paper.

**Writing your Topic as a Question**

Once you have a specific topic for your paper, write your topic as the question which your paper will answer. Doing this is a great way to focus your paper and ensure that you meet the paper’s purpose. In fact, your purpose will determine the type of question that you ask.

For example, an argumentative paper would probably have a yes/no question, such as “Should the U.S. have used the atomic bomb in World War II?” or “Should the morning after pill be sold to girls under 16?” or “Should animal organs be used for human transplants?” or “Which is a better strategy for the EU to follow to encourage change in Burma – engagement or isolation?” And then, of course, your paper would argue for your answer to the question.

An analytical paper most likely has a why/how question, such as “Why has childhood obesity been increasing in the United States?” or “How has Poland’s ban on abortions affected women’s lives?” or “How effective is the article in supporting the author’s thesis?” or “How could the EU best reform its agricultural subsidies?” And then, of course, your paper will analyze the various answers, justifying your point of view to the audience.

An informative paper often has a what/why/how question, such as “What are the negative aspects of wind energy?” or “What are the causes of anorexia in teenage boys?” or “How can managers evaluate whether to invest money in a software upgrade project?” And then, of course, your paper will explain the various answers, giving the readers a new way of looking at the topic.

**Characteristics of a Good Paper Topic**

* **Your question does not have a simple answer.** A good question has several alternative answers, or no accepted answer, or maybe an easy but unsatisfactory answer. In other words, there is no one “right” answer to your question. Your paper will give and justify your own best answer(s), and it will require research and critical thinking to do this.
* **Your question is worth answering.** The readers will care about the answer to your question. Your answer will have some significance.
* **Your paper will achieve its purpose.** Will your informative paper truly give your readers a new perspective? Will your readers accept your analysis in your analytical paper? Will your persuasive paper succeed in changing your readers’ view? This is especially important to consider with persuasive paper topics. Avoid topics in which arguments are mostly based on (usually unchanging) personal beliefs, rather than reason and evidence. Whether abortion should be legalized is such a topic.
* **You are interested in the topic.** You will spend a lot of time with this topic, so choose something that will not bore or torture you.
* **The topic is the right size for the length of the paper.** Make sure you will not have too little or too much to say for the number of pages allowed.
* **There is enough (but not too much) information available in reliable sources.** If you find too much information, you will need to narrow your topic further; if you find too little information, you should widen your topic.
* **You have enough time to do what you need to do.** How much time do you have before the due date? You may have to limit the complexity of your topic if you have waited too long to start….

**Thinking (Brainstorming)**



When you have a topic, start brainstorming. Write down all the possible answers to your question, and write down all the information, opinions, and questions you have about your topic. Brainstorming will help you see what you already know, what you think, what you think you know, and what else you need to find out about your topic. Writing things down also ensures that you will not forget your great ideas later. (Although this is a really short section, it is a very important step!)

**Doing Research**



Doing research is covered on pp. 3-12 of the *Research and APA Style Guide*. Read them!

What you must remember is that “doing good research takes time.” Do not expect to do research once and find everything that you need for your paper. Research is an on-going part of the writing process. You will start now, doing general research to learn more about your topic, but you will continue doing research throughout the writing process, as you discover a thesis, make a basic outline and then a detailed outline, write your paper, and revise your paper. Also, do not be afraid to change your topic a little (or a lot) if your research leads you in a different direction.

To make research more effective and less time-consuming, you can do three things:

* **Plan your research before your start**, using the research guide’s tips (pp. 3-4).
* **Set up and follow a research schedule.** Give yourself a set amount of time to do your preliminary research. Start working on your paper, and go back to researching later when you know exactly what you need to find.
* **Immediately record source information.** Write down the address or bookmark the web page of every good source, even if you are not sure if you will use it…you may want to later.

**Thesis Statement**



The thesis statement is the most important sentence in your paper. If someone asked you, “What does your paper say?” your answer would be your thesis statement. *Everything* you write will support this statement.

**A good thesis statement usually includes**

* **Main idea of the paper.** ONE idea. The entire paper is based on this statement.
* **Your opinion or point of view.** The thesis statement is not a fact nor a question, but your view of the topic and what you want to say about it.
* **Purpose of the paper.** From the thesis, it should be clear what the paper will do.
* **Answer to the research question.** Ask yourself the question and then answer it with your thesis. Is it truly an answer? (if not, change the question or the answer!)
* **An element of surprise.** This means that the thesis is interesting, engaging, and perhaps not so expected.
* **Clarity.** It should be understandable after one reading and have no mistakes.

When should you write your thesis statement? It depends on when you know the answer to your research question. You may have an idea before you begin researching, you may discover it as you research, or you may not know it until you have almost finished writing your paper. It’s useful to have a thesis idea at the beginning to help you focus, but it’s also OK to change your thesis statement as you go through the writing process and learn and think more about your topic.

**Planning – Basic Outline**



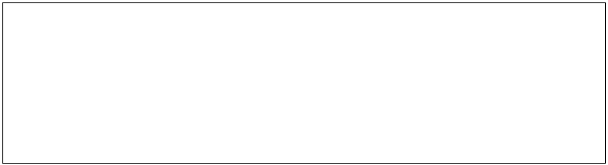
After you have a preliminary thesis statement (the answer to your research question), you can make a basic outline. You may be able to do this before doing any research, or you may need to read more about the topic first. You should, however, have a basic outline before you finish researching in order to ensure that your paper is focused on YOUR thoughts, not just your sources’.

A basic outline is your first attempt to organize the ideas of your paper. It will help you focus your research and consider the order of your ideas. To make one:

**Choosing and ordering points**

1. Write your question and answer (preliminary thesis statement). Don’t worry about writing a beautiful, memorable, strong thesis statement yet; just a simple answer to your question is enough to start the basic outline.
2. Write down all the reasons/arguments/effects/solutions (each type of paper is different) you have to answer your question and support your thesis. Do not look at your sources – use your own brain.
3. Look at your list and organize the ideas. Some may be combined as one larger idea; some may just repeat others in different words. You may decide to delete some too.
4. The remaining ideas will be the main points of your paper. These ideas are the sections of your paper.
5. Decide how to order these points. What order will you follow – chronological, cause to effect, problem to solution, most important to least important, weakest to strongest? Which order will make your paper the strongest and most interesting?
6. Your paper should also cover alternative or opposing viewpoints to show that you have done complete research and considered all ideas. In this “con section,” you will present and refute (argue against) other views of your topic.

**EXAMPLE BASIC OUTLINE before research (argumentative paper)** Research Question: Are birth control pills safe for women*?*

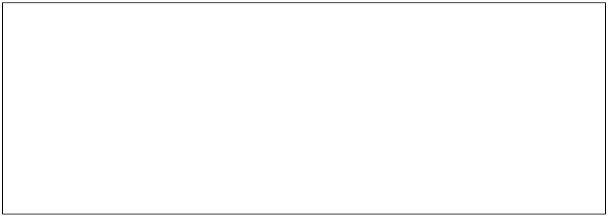


**Thesis: Birth control pills are safe.**

**Sections:**

1. **Pills contain nothing harmful to health.**
2. **Pills bring health benefits to women.**
3. **Myths about birth control pills are wrong.**

**EXAMPLE BASIC OUTLINE before research (analysis paper)** Research Question: Why has childhood obesity increased in the United States?



**Thesis: Childhood obesity has increased in the United States due to the unhealthy**

**environment in which many American children are raised.**

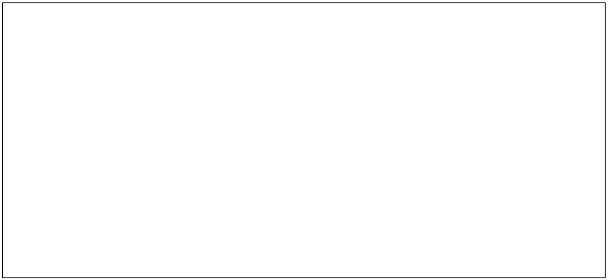
**Sections:**

1. **Children eat more than in the past.**
2. **Children often do not eat healthy meals.**
3. **Children do not have as much physical activity as in the past.**
4. **Parents model bad habits.**
5. **Others say that food companies, advertising are responsible.**

**Breaking sections into smaller parts**

1. Those are very basic outlines. It is possible to add more to them, especially after a little research. For each section, think of how much support you have. If you have a lot of supporting details (facts, examples, expert opinions) and explanations, then you will need more than one paragraph for that section. Some sections, especially your strongest, need more than one paragraph, while others may have only one.
2. Divide your sections into smaller points. Write the idea of each possible paragraph as a sentence so you can see how/whether it still answers the research question.

**EXAMPLE BASIC OUTLINE after more thinking and/or research (argumentative paper)** Research Question: Are birth control pills safe for women*?*



**Thesis: Although there are some disadvantages, birth control pills are safe.**

**Sections:**

1. **Pills contain nothing harmful to health.**
2. **Pills bring some health benefits to women.**

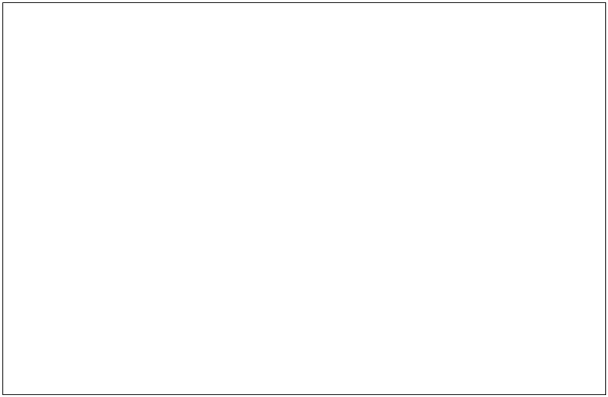
**IV. Myths about birth control pills are wrong.**

1. They do not cause ovarian cancer, but prevent it.
2. They do not cause breast cancer.
3. It is safe to use them when breastfeeding if done right.

**IV. There are some minor disadvantages, but not for healthy women.**

(4 sections, with a total of 6 paragraphs)

**EXAMPLE BASIC OUTLINE after more thinking and/or research (analysis paper)**Research Question: Why has childhood obesity increased in the United States?



**Thesis: Childhood obesity has increased in the United States due to the unhealthy**

**environment in which many American children are raised.**

**Sections:**

1. **Children eat more than in the past (portion sizes have increased).**
2. **Children often do not eat healthy meals.**
3. Healthy food is hard to get (expensive + rare).
4. Schools provide unhealthy food
5. **Children do not have as much physical activity as in the past.**
6. Physical activity in schools has decreased.
7. Some children live in areas unsafe for outdoor activity.
8. Many children watch too much TV.
9. **Parents model bad habits.**

1. Parents do not have time, money, or information to prepare healthy meals.

1. **Food companies and advertising may bear some responsibility, but parents should be able to help children resist them.**

(5 sections, with a total of 8 paragraphs)

**Planning – Taking Notes**



An important part of the research and planning process is taking notes of the information and ideas that you find. As you read a source, marking and writing down the important things that you read will help you to remember them and understand them better. It may seem time-consuming, but writing the paper will go faster if you already have all your ideas marked and written down.

Start taking notes from or on your sources during or after your research period. It’s easier to do this after you have a basic outline. Then you can organize the notes around the main points of your paper. Still, you will probably have more notes than you need for your paper because your original ideas and organization will change.

**Where to take notes**

* **On photocopies or printed Internet documents**
* Highlight or underline important information.
* Take notes in the margin. Write down your comments/questions about the information. Note which main point from your paper the information supports (this will help you when you are organizing and writing your paper later).
* **On a computer file**
* Create a separate Word document for each section of your paper.
* Take notes of important information from paper sources. Don’t forget to include the author’s name.
* Put text copied from web pages in quotation marks. Be very careful – this often leads to unintentional plagiarism. Don’t forget to include the author’s name and web address.
* **In a notebook**
* Write the author's name at the top of the page.
* Take notes of important information. In the margin, note which main point from your paper the information supports.
* **On note cards**
* Write one piece of information on each card.
* Don’t forget the author’s name and other source information.
* Put the main point from your paper at the top of the card so you can organize all the notes later.

**What to take notes about**

* Background information about your topic which is necessary for your paper.
* Arguments and explanations which support or oppose your ideas.
* Facts, examples, expert opinions, and other supporting details.

**How to take notes**

* **Summarize** – Write the main points of the source in your own words. Good for sources with ideas, but not many details, related to your topic.
* **Paraphrase** – retell important information in your own words; use quotation marks for directly copied words. Good for details which will support/oppose you.
* **Quote** – copy the exact words from the source. Good for strong, exciting passages.
* **Comment** – write any questions or ideas you think of when you are reading sources.

**Planning – Detailed Outline**



After going through your sources and taking notes, you can create a detailed outline by adding details to your basic outline as well as adding any new points that you found.

A detailed outline plans each body paragraph of your paper for you, from main point to supporting points to supporting details.

Many students would prefer to skip this part of the writing process and just start writing their papers, since it takes a lot of time, thinking, and re-thinking to develop a good outline. Well, if you are an advanced academic writer, go ahead. Writers with a lot of experience know what works best for them. However, if you are still learning how to write academic papers, you should make a detailed outline for several reasons:

* You will learn whether you have enough support for your thesis statement.
* You will have a map to follow when writing your paper.
* You will avoid major organizational problems in your paper if you organize your ideas before you write.
* You will have a chance to think more about your topic, refining your ideas.
* Some instructors will require draft outlines before your paper is due, or even final outlines with your paper, so you need to know how to write outlines.

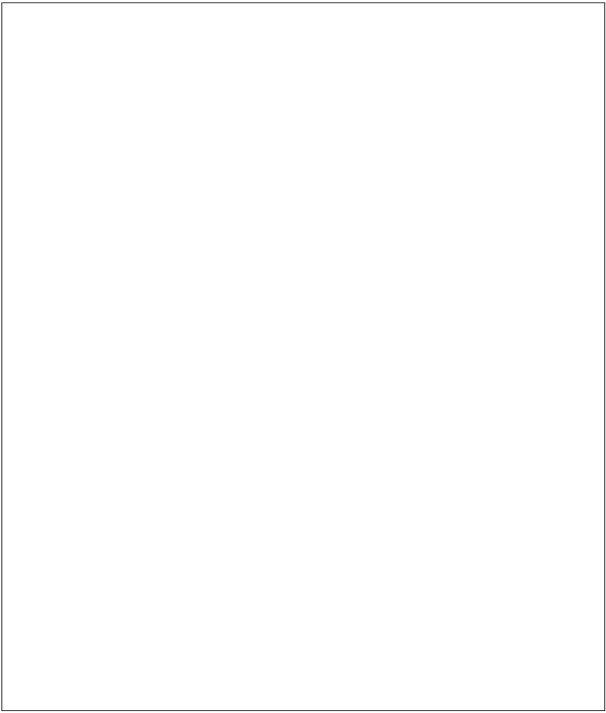
After you have mastered the academic writing process, then you can decide whether or when to write a detailed outline. Here are the steps to follow when making your outline:

1. First, make changes to your basic outline’s thesis and main points until you are satisfied with your ideas and the order of your sections.
2. Then go through your notes and find supporting points for each section of your outline.
3. Organize the supporting points in each section.
4. Go through your notes and add supporting details (facts, examples, expert opinion, descriptions, quotes, etc.) to each point. Be thorough so that the reader of your outline can understand how the detail supports the point.

* Always include the source of any research that you put in your outline (Author, year). If you use the source’s exact words in your outline, use quotation marks.

1. Now, based on the amount of supporting points and details in each section, you can determine how many paragraphs you will need.
2. Divide your outline into paragraphs, each with a main point written in sentence form (preliminary topic sentence) and list of supporting points and details.

**EXAMPLE DETAILED OUTLINE - 3 paragraphs (argumentative paper)**



**Thesis: Although there are some disadvantages, birth control pills are safe.**

**Section/Paragraph #1 Pills contain nothing harmful to women’s health.**

1. Pills contain hormones produced by women’s bodies.
   1. Combination (estrogen+progestin) and progestin only (Planned Parenthood, 2003)
   2. Estrogen – activates uterus, thickens walls. Progesterone – helps uterus accept egg (National Cancer Institute, 2003)
2. Pills give women the right amount of hormones so they can’t get pregnant

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