

Writing a Solid Outline for a Paper

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Writing a good outline is probably the most underrated skill that is involved in successful research and writing. While we romanticize written works as being that of creative genius, in social sciences it is more about planning. An outline is your plan for your paper.

If you look at the shape of writing on my webpage, you will see the different elements of a research paper. But your outline has to be created in concentric circles, with the overall idea/question/hypothesis that is then addressed in the different sections of the paper.

Each section represents a key variable, relation, or actor that you are examining to address the issue. Each step that you take should therefore have a clear sequence to it. So, you not only need to make sure you have all the logical steps to complete the argument, but that they are in the proper order.

The outline gives you the foundation for the house you are going to build. Without it, one room may not connect properly with the other, the kitchen may open upon the bedroom, or you will start a large bedroom without giving enough room for the 3 others you need to make. So, the outline is a precise blueprint for your writing, and one that you therefore need to spend a great deal of time preparing. Once it is ready, your job of writing will flow much more easily, all the parts serving their function and fitting together to provide a coherent message.

The outline ensures that you have nested logic, as in computer programming. That ensures, in turn that you have an overall cumulative logical trajectory to your argument, and that you have both modularity and symmetry in the paper. It will make the actual writing your paper much more straightforward.

Here is a quick example from my recent research:

Question: Is it feasible for Paraguay to create a sugarcane ethanol industry?

- I. Agricultural
 - a. Is there enough land? Yes
 - b. Can Paraguay produce sugarcane at a competitive level?
 - c. How is agriculture organized in terms of ownership? Concentrated- problematic for distribution of rents
- II. Industrial
 - a. How adequate is the infrastructure?
 - i. Transportation routes from agricultural areas? In limited areas, ok, leads to regional distributional issues
 - ii. State of port facilities for potential export? Very poor

- b. Is there knowledge about the industrial process or is it possible to acquire it? Yes, but concentrated within Brazilian fdi, another prob
 - c. Can the product be produced competitively? Yes
 - d. How will it compete with petrol? Prob, Paraguay only has biodiesel, and state runs petrol company
- III. Governance
- a. Does the government have the technical capacity to manage the project? No, but acquirable, needs more resources
 - b. Is there adequate political support? Mixed, national support, but divided congress/executive
- IV. Conclusion- and steps to be taken
- a. Governance pre-empts technical and economic feasibility