

# In Context Toolbox – How to Make an Outline

The **In Context Toolbox** tip sheets are designed to help middle school and high school researchers prepare a written report. This document will explain how to **create an outline** as a guide to your report.

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The outline is the skeleton of a good piece of writing. The outline supplies the structural foundation for a well-written report, much like your bones supply the structural foundation for your body. Just like your bones, your paper's outline should be:

- **Complete** enough to cover your topic from head to toe.
- **Ordered** to ensure that each part is properly connected to its neighbor parts.
- **Coordinated** to maintain balance and consistency.
- **Interconnected** so that all parts work together in a unified whole.
- **Flexible** enough to allow for growth and development.

## Cover Your Topic Completely

Before you can write an outline, you have to know your topic inside and out, top to bottom, backwards and forwards. Test yourself by making a list of important facts and details about your topic. Jot down everything about the topic you can think of. If you can make a complete, thorough list, you're ready to proceed with your outline. If you can't, you better do some more research. As you do your research, add new facts and details to your list.

Your list should include everything you know that's important about your topic. For example, say you're writing a report about global warming. Here's a list you might create:

- Climate scientists report evidence of rising temperatures worldwide.
- Reforestation could reduce carbon dioxide levels
- Some energy sources don't produce greenhouse gas emissions.
- Might cause flooding if polar ice caps melt.
- Kyoto Protocol - international treaty would limit greenhouse gas emissions.
- Might cause deserts to expand, croplands to dry up.
- Carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has increased by 25% in past 200 years.
- Projected global temperature increase: 3-8 degrees Fahrenheit in 50 years.
- Hotter weather, increase in natural disasters in 1990s could be signs of lasting climate change.
- Atmospheric carbon dioxide traps heat like a greenhouse.
- Controversial - most scientists accept theory, but some don't.
- Might cause sea levels to rise - salt water could intrude into fresh water supplies.
- Burning fossil fuels, aka greenhouse gases, can increase carbon dioxide.
- Many countries haven't ratified the Kyoto Protocol, and might not abide by it.
- Other greenhouse gases (chlorofluorocarbons, nitrous oxide, methane) contribute to global warming.
- Energy conservation could reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

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## Get Your Thoughts in Order

The information in an outline needs to be arranged in order. One way to put information in order is to classify it in groups. Then all you have to do is arrange the groups in a logical sequence, and everything will be in order.

Take a fresh look at our list of global warming facts and details. Here's how we might put them in order:

### Group 1: Observations that gave rise to the global warming theory

- Climate scientists report evidence of rising temperatures worldwide.
- Carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has increased by 25% in past 200 years.
- Projected global temperature increase: 3-8 degrees Fahrenheit in 50 years.

### Group 2: The global warming theory

- Burning fossil fuels, aka greenhouse gases, can increase carbon dioxide.
- Atmospheric carbon dioxide traps heat like a greenhouse.
- Other greenhouse gases (chlorofluorocarbons, nitrous oxide, methane) contribute to global warming.
- Controversial - most scientists accept theory, but some don't.

### Group 3: Possible effects, if the theory is true

- Hotter weather, increase in natural disasters in 1990s could be signs of lasting climate change.
- Might cause sea levels to rise - salt water could intrude into fresh water supplies.
- Might cause flooding if polar ice caps melt.
- Might cause deserts to expand, croplands to dry up.

### Group 4: Possible solutions and future concerns

- Energy conservation could reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
- Reforestation could reduce carbon dioxide levels.
- Some energy sources don't produce greenhouse gas emissions.
- Kyoto Protocol - international treaty would limit greenhouse gas emissions.
- Many countries haven't ratified the Kyoto Protocol, and might not abide by it.

## Get Coordinated

Classifying information into groups is a key feature of outlines. Outlines can (and usually do) have many levels of groups. The top level has the main headings. Below the main headings lies another level, the sub-headings. Nearly all outlines have another level underneath the sub-headings, for facts and details about the various sub-headings. Sometimes an outline can have four, five, six, or more levels!

The main thing to remember about levels is that they are coordinated. That is, every level should contain roughly equivalent information. This means that the top-level main headings should be names for large categories of information. The second-level sub-headings should be names for smaller categories of information that fit underneath the larger categories of information. Third-level terms are facts and details that fit underneath the smaller categories of information.

For example, here's how our Global Warming outline might look:

- I. Level 1
  - A. Level 2
    - i. Level 3
      - 1. Level 4

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Here's what our Global Warming example would look like:

- I. Introduction
- II. Body
  - A. Background Observations
    - i. Global temperatures are rising
    - ii. Atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO<sup>2</sup>) is increasing
    - iii. Temperatures projected to rise 3°-8° F by 2050
  - B. Global Warming Theory
    - i. Burning fossil fuels increases atmospheric CO<sup>2</sup>
    - ii. Atmospheric CO<sup>2</sup> traps heat like a greenhouse
    - iii. Other greenhouse gases trap heat
      1. Chlorofluorocarbons
      2. Nitrous oxide
      3. Methane
    - iv. Most scientists accept theory; some don't
  - C. Possible Global Warming Effects
    - i. Ice caps melt
    - ii. Sea levels rise
      1. Salt water intrusion
      2. Flooding
    - iii. Deserts expand
      1. Crop lands dry up
      2. Erosion accelerates
  - D. Ways to Curtail Global Warming
    - i. Conserve energy
    - ii. Switch to renewable energy sources
      1. Solar
      2. Geothermal
    - iii. Plant trees to rebuild forests
    - iv. Reduce emissions by treaty
      1. Kyoto Protocol
      2. Ratification at issue
- III. Conclusion

Get the idea? Every level has the same kind of information. Higher levels have broad, general categories of information. Lower levels have specific factual details that are subordinate to their higher level headings.

## Get Connected

In a well-written outline, everything fits together to support your main points. Once you've made the first draft of an outline, always read it over and make sure that your lower-level details support your higher-level points. If you feel you need more details to support your higher-level points, do some more research and dig up some useful facts!

Also, make sure that you've ordered everything just the way you plan to write about it in your paper. If you think that a different order would get your point across better, now's the time to make the change.

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## Stay Flexible

When your outline is finished, you're ready to start writing your report. Once you've begun writing, sometimes you run across new information you didn't cover in your outline. Other times you realize that you left something out of your outline that really needs to be in your report. No problem! If you've done a good job structuring your outline, it'll be flexible enough to let you make changes even after you've started writing your report. Feel free to change your outline, as long as the change makes your report more complete. The end result will be a better report!

**Need more help? Ask your librarian!**