

MOVING FROM NOTES TO AN OUTLINE

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When you have a lot of notes on hand, it can be difficult to know what to do with them to help you shape the essay you are about to write. Here are some strategies for making sense of your notes:

Glossing

Sometimes we don't know what we've gathered in notes until we've done some kind of organizing of them. Think of the act of glossing as a kind of annotating that you do when you've compiled a variety of notes on your topic. It's the word or phrase you might write in a margin to remember what that moment was about.

For example, say you were writing an essay arguing against the use of chemical pesticides and one of your sources is Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. In your notes you've written down the following quotation from this text:

The whole process of spraying seems caught up in an endless spiral. Since DDT was released for civilian use, a process of escalation has been going on in which ever more toxic materials must be found. This has happened because insects, in a triumphant vindication of Darwin's principle of the survival of the fittest, have evolved super races immune to the particular insecticide used, hence a deadlier one has always to be developed—and then a deadlier one than that. It has happened also because, for reasons to be described later, destructive insects often undergo a “flareback,” or resurgence, after spraying, in numbers greater than before. Thus the chemical war is never won, and all life is caught in its violent crossfire (8).

What word or phrase might you use to describe or summarize what this quotation is about? What would your marginal note be? Ideally you would want something that indicates both what the paragraph is about, and your position on it (your ideas about it). One summary/gloss for this paragraph might be “vicious cycle of destruction from chemical pesticides.”

Categorizing

Once you have all of your notes glossed you can sort them into categories. Categories can be anything from the individual topics you are going to discuss (one category for this sample essay might be “why chemical pesticides are problematic”), or they can be components of the essay that you feel will be necessary, such as “historical background.”

Then, once you have your categories, you can determine an organizational structure that you think might work for your topic to build into your outline (keep in mind that this outline will likely change, depending on what you discover in the writing of the essay).

NOTE: You can also categorize and then gloss – if you're already clear on what information will need to go where in your essay (information you'll need for “historical background” for example, will hopefully be obvious).

MOVING FROM NOTES TO AN OUTLINE (CONTINUED)

The shaping force of thesis statements *

Your thesis statement will inevitably drive the evidence that you offer in support of that argument. One way to organize an essay, therefore, is to simply follow the component parts of the thesis in the structure of the essay. For example, if your thesis was structured as

Although X appears to account for Z, Y accounts for it better

a reader would anticipate that the essay would deal with the claims for X first and then offer how Y is actually a more complete interpretation of Z.

NOTE: be careful of the thesis that simply states “I will discuss A, B, and C” as there is no room for you to take a stand on A, B, and C. Make sure your thesis identifies your ideas, AND makes an argument for how those ideas are related.

Climactic order *

Climactic order means you arrange elements from least important to most important. This may help prevent your essay from trailing off at the end. NOTE: Do not assume your most obvious point (the one least likely to produce disagreement from others) is the best point!

Least important: your least important point is the point that is the most obvious and predictable. It is least important because it does not require much analysis or explanation for the reader to acknowledge its importance, nor does it offer any contradictory material that might produce disagreement.

Most important: your most important point will be revealing and less obvious. You likely feel that you needed the information that preceded it in order to offer your most compelling material. This might be where nuances in the topic are revealed, or where your argument takes a significant turn

Compare and contrast *

Comparison and contrasting elements of an essay can either be organized by discussing subject A and then contrasting it with subject B, or you make all the points you wish to make about subject A and then make points about B by referring back to A as you go.

Alternatively, you can organize by topic: A1, B1, then A2 and B2, and so forth. You'll discuss both A and B in a series of subtopics (if you were discussing films A might be script, B might be special effects, and so forth).

NOTE: Make sure that if you choose the comparison/contrast structure that you do so in a way that invites analysis, not just reporting. Simply representing similarities and differences is not enough – you'll want to indicate how or why the similarities and/or differences are significant.

* adapted from *Writing Analytically*, Rosenwasser and Stephen, 5th ed.