

Outlining an Essay

This handout provides the basic format for an essay. By outlining the different sections of your paper, as follows, you should be able to clarify your topic while offering pertinent supporting information and engaging your audience.

1. Topic: Take a good look at the assignment. Decide where your personal opinion lies within the subject.

- Example: Film Review of Waking Life, by Richard Linklater

2. Thesis: A well written thesis will describe briefly but effectively your main idea as well as your stance on the issue.

- Example: The unnamed main character in Waking Life (played by Willy Wiggins) is struggling with his understanding of two opposing realities; that of the waking world and that of the dream world. Through his discovery of a state of consciousness called lucid dream, he realizes that each reality is as real as the other.

3. Introduction: The introduction will elaborate on the specific details that support your thesis. It will give a brief history of the subject and indicate the direction of the paper.

- Example: Richard Linklater's most recent film, Waking Life (2001), is an intellectual and intensely thought provoking film. The unnamed main character in Waking Life (played by Willy Wiggins) is struggling with his understanding of two opposing realities; that of the waking world and that of the dream world. Through his discovery of a state of consciousness called lucid dream, he realizes that each reality is as real as the other. Linklater explores these realities using philosophical ideas and many different viewpoints without ever fully supporting any of them. The cast of more than 30 characters offers unique dialogue about the condition of the human mind. The addition of Linklater's editing process and the use of animation makes this film truly dreamlike.

4. Body Paragraphs: Each paragraph should relate directly to the thesis or to the main idea of the paper. If a subject is mentioned in the introduction, it must be covered in the paper; visa versa, if the subject becomes a main point in the paper, it must be mentioned in the introduction.

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Paragraph 1:

- Defining lucidity in relation to the film. The term lucid refers to a sense of clarity. At a high level, you are aware that you are experiencing a dream and therefore can interact and control the choices you make.
- Give Examples through quotes. He replies, “You gotta be able to recognize it. You gotta be able to ask yourself, ‘Hey man, is this a dream’ See, most people never ask themselves that...”
- Explain quotation. The discussions switch from examining the philosophical mind to actually discussing the dream consciousness. This is the stage where the main character becomes lucid.

Paragraph 2:

- Introduce philosophies of the film. Waking Life explores many insightful philosophies that serve to confuse, as well as guide the main character, not to mention the audience.
- Give Examples: “Existentialism is often discussed as if it’s a philosophy of despair, but I think the truth is just the opposite,” the professor says to the class.
- Examining the nuances of the example: He goes on to explain, in contrast, the idea that people are not responsible for their own decisions because society guides all human action. To the professor, this definition of the post-modernist view presents “a whole new world of excuses.”

Paragraph 3:

- Discuss Linklater’s editing style. Waking Life is filmed using a process called rotoscoping. The scenes are shot on digital film, which are then digitally and artistically re-edited. In the next stage, computer artists trace over the live action shots creating a new form of animation mimicking a dream state.
- Give descriptive explanations of visuals. Surreal, impressionistic, and dreamlike, the background seems to float and the characters become secondary to the visual perception.

8. Conclusion: Any good conclusion should revisit the main sections of your paper. It should leave the audience with a firm grasp of your argument and answer any questions that arose within the text.

- Example: Waking Life is monumental in that it does not give you answers. It presents you with information that you can form into meaning, just as the characters must do in the film. It is difficult at times to sift through all of the theories and find purpose. However, I feel that this was an intentional distraction by Richard Linklater to express the idea that we are all clouded by ideas until we can let them go and enter a stage of clarity. The visual and intellectual subtleties make this a movie you must see twice, thrice, or more. This is a film for anyone who thinks we all might just be asleep, in life’s waiting room.