

Descriptive Outlining

Definition: You have probably used outlines before writing in order to plan essays, but a descriptive outline is actually a tool you can use after generating a draft in order to evaluate how well you executed your plan. In short, the descriptive outline is a way to look at what each paragraph *says* and *does*. This process allows you to

- **Consider the Purpose of Each Paragraph:** Sometimes it is easy to get lost in what we say and lose track of exactly why we are saying it or how what we say connects to a larger claim or thesis. By considering the purpose of each paragraph—or what each paragraph does—you can think about the role of the paragraph in the paper as a whole.
- **Identify and Address Disconnects:** If you find a disconnect between what the paragraph is supposed to do and what it actually says, you can revise to correct the issue. For example, if the paragraph is supposed to provide background on a subject but instead jumps into current events, you can potentially move the current events later in the paper in order to go back and add the necessary background.
- **Identify Options for Revision:** For example, you may find that your paragraphs could be rearranged into a more logical order, or you may notice an important connection between paragraphs that you could highlight in a transition sentence.

While a paragraph could *say* an infinite number of things in any number of ways, the list of what a paragraph can *do* is a bit more predictable. Here are some (but not nearly all) of the things a paragraph can do:

- Tells a story
- Lists (catalogues, enumerates, itemizes)
- Shows how something is done
- Reasons (syllogistic, dialectical, inductive)
- Describes
- Explains
- Compares
- Defines a term
- Gives examples
- Analyzes (takes something apart)
- Synthesizes (puts two or more ideas together showing the relationship between them)
- Cites (refers to an authority)
- Evaluates (explains how good something is or what it's good for)
- Offers a hypothesis (makes an educated guess)
- Gives a history
- Projects the future

Sample Descriptive Outline

Essay Title: A Commentary on Our Overuse of Cars

Thesis: Cars may be on the way out as a major means of transportation.

Plan: To support the thesis with two reasons.

Intro Paragraph:

Does: Introduces the proposition by describing the present situation.

Says: Use of cars is at a peak, but there are signs of change.

Body Paragraph 1:

Does: Develops the first reason by citing comparative statistics.

Says: Our diminishing oil supply is made worse by the way cars waste gas.

Body Paragraph 2:

Does: Develops the second reason by telling an anecdote.

Says: Cars waste time and human energy.