Outlining an Essay

Introduction Paragraph
The first step when writing an essay is to develop a clear idea for the paper. The introduction of most essays consists of a basic overview of your topic and a thesis statement.

1. **INTRODUCTION**: Just as every story needs a beginning, every essay needs an introduction. The purpose of an introduction is to present the subject of your paper to your audience. It is also your chance to briefly present any background information that may be necessary to understanding the subject.

2. **THESIS STATEMENT**: The thesis statement tells the reader specifically what will be discussed in the paper. It is a road map for your essay, so it is important to make it clear and easy to find. A good thesis must follow these basic guidelines:
   - It has a specific topic.
   - It has an argument and takes a clear position. For example, instead of just discussing blues music you would discuss Billie Holiday and her importance as a female blues singer.
   - It (often) provides a detailed preview of the points that will be discussed in detail in the body of the paper. For example, “English Theatre during the 15th century was strongly influenced by Puritan nobility and the death of William Shakespeare.”

An important note: A thesis is not set in stone and it will often change slightly as you do more research and become more familiar with your subject. Adjusting the thesis as you write is crucial.

Body Paragraphs
Most body paragraphs (or groups of paragraphs) will contain each of the items outlined in the M.E.A.L. Plan:

**M: MAIN POINT**
Paragraphs typically begin with a topic sentence that introduces the subject of the new paragraph. The topic sentence is often argumentative – think of it as a mini thesis for your paragraph.

**E: EVIDENCE**
Evidence comes in many forms: quotes/paraphrased information from secondary sources, observations/personal experience, detailed explanations with examples, etc. Remember that sentences rarely (if ever) begin with quotes – all evidence should be introduced with a signal phrase and qualified so that readers know why it is credible.
A: ANALYSIS
Evidence should be followed by analysis in your own words that explains why the evidence is important or how it is related to the main point of the paragraph. Analysis may begin with phrases such as, “This passage shows that…” or “This research proves that….” Think of the analysis portion as your response to the questions, “So what?” or “What’s the point?”

L: LINK
The final step when writing a paragraph is to link the information you just presented back to the main purpose of your paper (your thesis) and/or forward to the next paragraph (as a transition). If the purpose of the paragraph in relation to your overall argument or point isn’t crystal clear, make it clear here. Likewise, if the transition between paragraphs isn’t natural or conducive to the connection of ideas, provide one.

Note: The Evidence and Analysis steps can be repeated as many times as necessary in a paragraph (within reason); or, each new piece of Evidence can become a new paragraph.

CONCLUSION
The objective of the conclusion is to go from your specific main points to a more broad analysis of why the information you provided is important to the reader. To do this, the conclusion should first revisit the main points you presented in your thesis, including any strong arguments made in the body of the essay. The conclusion should then make a strong final impression on the reader. This can be done by doing any one of the following:

- Calling for some sort of action.
- Universalizing the situation (comparing it to other situations).
- Suggesting possible solutions, results or consequences.

An important note: The conclusion should not include any new information or ideas that were not discussed in detail in the body of the essay.