

## Structure before content – a first outline of the research project

Frequently, those who search for traces of history quickly compile an almost incomprehensible mountain of material. In order not to get lost in this chaos, it is important to prepare a first outline of the theme before beginning the research. This outline should be kept in view throughout the research process and checked continually against the already-researched material to see how much the outline must be changed. Thus, the outline is part of the research, and the first outline is meant to be thrown out during the research process!

But how does one create a first outline? To begin with, you need to get into your theme. Hence it is advisable to read a summary so as to recognise those aspects of the subject that relate to your theme. If your theme has not yet been investigated, it can be useful to start by interviewing a contemporary witness. You can then create your first outline on the basis of rough but broad entry-level knowledge.

You can outline your subject according to various principles. A first principle of outlining is the “chronological” one. Here, one starts the outline with the beginning of an event and its causes, and one follows the occurrences through to their aftermath. In preparing a chronological outline, it is not enough simply to string together a series of dates. Instead, you, as the authors, must decide what you consider essential. You thus specify themes that follow a chronological sequence: for example, in a biography, “Kindergarten – School – University – Family.”

Another outlining principle is the “structural” one. Here, the individual event is unimportant for your investigation; instead, associations are central. In other words, you orient yourselves to various aspects of the theme. For example, in a project involving immigrants in a particular city neighbourhood, you can ask on what plane integration takes place: on the work level, place of residence, social relationships, etc.

It is also possible to combine various outlining styles when the theme requires it. An historical work can, for example, have chronological as well as comparative aspects.

The outline is complete; now the material that you collect and evaluate in the course of your research must be coordinated with it. When doing so, you will notice that your materials often can't be allocated to a single chapter, because they touch on more than one aspect of the theme.

The simplest solution in such cases is to divide the material according to outlining contexts and sort the topics into chapter piles. But before cutting, make sure that you have a second copy of the source material in its complete form! In addition, each piece of paper should bear a record of where it originated. The best way of doing this would be to develop a system of abbreviations, so you don't have to write the complete bibliographical reference on every slip of paper.

**Chronological  
outline**

**Structural  
outline**

**Coordinating  
the material with  
the outline**