Scratch Outline

There are as many ways of organizing a piece of writing as there are writers and reasons for writing. There are formal outlines, which follow rules that prescribe the alternating use of numbers and letters and tend to force a writer to be comprehensive.

A scratch outline, by contrast, serves only the writer’s use and may be cast in any form that works. Begin by asking: What are the major points of my personal statement and project proposal? For example, the scratch outline for your personal statement might look something like this:

I. Beginning
   II. Interest or motivation for studying abroad
   III. How your program will enhance your learning/advance career goals
   IV. Closing

Now apply a similar question to each major point:

I. Beginning
   A. Start with a clear and simple statement to “set the scene.”
   B. Elaborate on a specific personal experience.

II. Interest or motivation for studying abroad
   A. Describe what you find so intriguing about your country of study.
   B. Explain how your academic interests are suited to this country.

III. How your program will enhance your learning/advance career goals
   A. Specify how this experience will contribute to your intellectual and personal development.
   B. Clarify how your program will help meet your professional goals.

IV. Closing
   A. Tie your concluding paragraph to the opening paragraph.
   B. End with how this experience will leave you transformed.

How far you take the scratch outline depends on your willingness to spend time on planning. But the more planning you do, the easier the actual writing will be. A good scratch outline suggests where possible paragraph breaks might come, and the ideas you have jotted down in the headings are the germs of topic statements and supporting sentences.