



WHAT IS AN OUTLINE?

INTRODUCTION: An outline is a general plan of what you are going to write in the finished paper. It will show the order of your information, what each paragraph will discuss, etc. An outline is a hierarchical way to display related items of text to graphically depict their relationships. They are often used by students for research papers.

Where Do I Begin?

The first thing you might want to do is to make a list of the things that you will need to write about in your paper. Then see if these items can be grouped together so that they seem to make sense in a few paragraphs. If your paper has five paragraphs your outline will have five main sections. It is difficult to show you exactly how it looks here, but it is something like this:

- I. Main topic of first paragraph
 - A. Important subtopic or detail
 - B. Important subtopic or detail
- II. Main topic of second paragraph
 - A. and so on
 - B.
 - C.
- III. and so on with each paragraph

Why Create An Outline?

Outlines provide a summary showing the logical flow of a paper. There are many reasons, but in general, it may be helpful to create an outline when you want to show the hierarchical relationship or logical ordering of information. For research papers, an outline may help you keep track of large amounts of information. For creative writing, an outline may help organize the various plot threads and help keep track of character traits. Many people find that organizing an oral report or presentation in outline form helps them speak more effectively in front of a crowd. Below are the primary reasons for creating an outline.

- Aids in the process of writing
- Helps you organize your ideas
- Presents your material in a logical form
- Shows the relationships among ideas in your writing
- Constructs an ordered overview of your writing
- Defines boundaries and groups

Textbooks generally recommend that, before constructing an outline, a writer should research the topic and take notes--preferably on index cards--as they go. The notes need not be more than a summary of what the author thinks is important. Each card normally has a heading (called a slug) in the upper-left hand corner. Each slug later becomes a heading or subheading in the outline.

The writer can later lay these cards on a table and group those that belong together. This creates a rough division of the topic. The writer may then put the cards in an order that approximates a final version.

Experts recommend that an outline have three to five main categories. If you have more than that look for ways to combine smaller segments into broader topics. If you have only one subpoint, integrate it with the point above or reorganize. Also avoid overlapping between categories.

Two Purposes of an Outline

- **For You as a Writer (this is the “working outline”):** You may draft a *working* outline in order to organize the sections of your paper as you list the major ideas/topics you plan to discuss. You may add minor topics and supporting details as your research continues. In the research and drafting processes, you may need to revise the information included in your working outline as new information comes to light.
- **For Your Instructor (this is the “final outline”):** A formal outline is often required as part of your assignment. The most important aspect of the *final* outline is that it is truly representative of your actual paper. If a topic is in your outline but not *adequately* discussed in your paper, revision is necessary. To serve as a guide for the reader, the final outline must accurately reflect the content of your paper. The formal outline to be submitted with your paper must follow MLA formatting.

About the Working Outline

The working outline does not need to be written in any specific format. It is for your own use, an informal rough draft of tentative information that you may use or discard later. You may write a working outline in whatever form seems most helpful for you. By the time you have finished your research and begun your paper, you should have a nearly complete outline to edit and use as your *final* outline.

About the Formal Outline

The standard format for a formal outline includes large Roman numerals for the main headings, capital letters for subtopics and Arabic numerals for the sub-subtopics. To find specific information regarding correct spacing and alignment, consult your English handbook or the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* for detailed instruction and sample outlines. Below is a brief example of an outline:

Outline

Thesis Statement: There are benefits as well as drawbacks to purchasing a home.

I. Benefits of Purchasing a Home

A. Financial Investment

B. Personal Privacy

II. Drawbacks to Purchasing a Home

A. Financial Commitment

B. Costly Maintenance

Things to Consider About Outlines

- **Thesis Statement:** Most outlines begin with the thesis statement, aligned to the left and placed directly below the heading (Title) of your outline.
- **Sentence Outline OR Topic Outline:** Consistency is the key to writing your outline. If your outline is in sentence form, all parts of it (major topics, minor topics, supporting details) must be in sentence form. If your outline is written in words, and phrases, all of it must be in that form. The main point to remember is that your outline will be one or the other, all sentences or all words and phrases, not a combination of both.
- **Paired Headings:** If you have a I., you must have at least a II. If you have an A., you must have a B. If you have a 1., you must have a 2. There is never a division without at least two headings, although you may have several more than two.
- **Comparable Numerals or Letters:** Like headings are also of equal significance to your paper. The B or C following an A is of comparable importance to the A. If the paired headings do not seem aligned, one being a minor point and the other a major area of discussion, you may need to move headings and subheadings around in the working outline to create smooth transition of ideas and information.
- **Coherence:** Your outline will reflect the progression of ideas in each section of your paper, from major topics to minor topics to supporting details or further information. In organizing your outline, you should find that you have grouped topics in a logical order, and you will be able to see at a glance if you have done so.

Remember:

Your topics, headings, etc. should be written in grammatically parallel structure. In addition, your goal is to organize your outline, as you will your paper, with clear divisions between major and minor points and with a logical progression of thought and balanced divisions.

The above information is adapted from *Purdue OWL* 2011, *Del Mar College* 2009, and *Answers Corp.* 2011.