



THE DOCUMENTED ESSAY

Developing an Informal Outline

An outline should represent a writer's best effort to explore a subject, to break it into parts, to arrange ideas, and to test out possible strategies of organization for the purpose of clarity. For short papers and extemporaneous writing, an informal or so-called scratch outline will generally serve the purpose. Even for long papers, you may find it useful to work informally for some time before committing yourself to a final, detailed plan. However, it is often necessary or required by the assignment to prepare a formal outline in the process of writing your paper.

DEVELOPING AN INFORMAL OUTLINE

An informal outline is a series of notes—single words or phrases—jotted down to refresh your memory as you write. An outline of this sort is useful when time is limited, as when you are writing examinations or brief papers in class.

Sample Informal Outline

The following is a sample informal or scratch outline for a full-length paper on telescopes.

Subject: The Development of the Telescope

- Galileo and the basic refractor
- the multi-element telescopes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries
- Newton and the reflecting telescope
- the construction of massive reflecting telescopes
- the advantages and limitations of refracting and reflecting designs

The list above provides some basic points that pertain to the subject of the paper. This serves as a starting point for the writer in preparing her/his paper. The exact form of an informal or scratch outline is unimportant since ordinarily you will be the only one who sees it. As you move from your subject to a manageably narrow topic (a particular slant or governing question that guides your research), you can modify or rearrange the list in any way to suit your purposes.

Using an informal or scratch outline can help to focus and organize your thoughts while preparing your paper. It can also be further developed to contain more precise information about your position and the form the essay will take. For example, the outline below was written in response to the question whether children are an interference in the lives of men and women.

Sample Informal Outline (Expanded)

Subject: Children are an interference in the lives of men and women. Do you agree or disagree?

Introduction

- agree
- children are costly
- children can destroy parents' relationship
- you are stuck with them

Costs of children

- clothes, food, necessities
- education
- support—possibly forever

Destruction of relationship

- take away time that parents would spend together
- possible disagreements about how to raise the child
- example #1

Stuck with them

- if you don't like them, you can't ignore them
- you always feel responsible for them
- example #2

Conclusion

- kids are a bad idea

Like the previous sample of an informal outline, in the expanded outline above there are no complete sentences or developed ideas. What is important about this outline is that the writer has a better sense of how to organize her/his paper and how to structure and develop her/his ideas on the topic of discussion.

In essence, the paper is taking shape from the writer's perspective, and the next step is to use the outline for support and direction in preparing the first draft of the paper.