



THE WRITING PROCESS

Developing a Formal 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. Your instructor may or may not require an outline as part of your assignment; if required, there are usually guidelines to follow in preparing the outline. When you have no specific guidelines, select the form that best suits the kind of paper you are writing, either an informal or scratch outline or a formal outline. In planning a long paper, especially one involving research, you will most likely want to make a formal outline that functions as a topic outline or sentence outline.

TOPIC OUTLINE

The topic outline, the most frequently used kind of formal outline, helps to organize longer papers. It consists of brief phrases or single words (not sentences) that are numbered or lettered to show the order and relative importance of the ideas. While topic outlines often seem precise and formal, they should be treated as part of the writing process. Developing such an outline can help you arrive at a satisfying plan for arranging your ideas. To prepare a topic outline, get all your ideas on paper. Let us say you have brainstormed the subject "The Army as a Career for College Men and Women" and produced this rough, unsorted list of ideas:

- Security
- Promotion slow but steady
- Many different branches appeal to different interests
- Low pay
- Commissioned ranks open to men and women graduates
- Can't be fired
- Cost of uniforms
- Discipline often annoying
- Frequent moves hard on soldier's family
- See interesting places and people
- Social life restricted to small circle
- Good retirement benefits
- Annual vacation with pay
- Military job training useful in civilian careers

Looking at your list, you discover that some points stress the advantages of an army career, others the disadvantages. The next step is to divide the notes into two categories:

Advantages

- Security
- Promotion slow but steady
- Annual vacation with pay
- Many different branches appeal to different interests
- Can't be fired
- See interesting places and people
- Good retirement benefits
- Social life restricted to a small circle

- Commissioned ranks open to men and women graduates

Disadvantages

- Low pay
- Cost of uniforms
- Discipline often annoying
- Frequent moves hard on soldier's family

In this form the relationship between the various ideas is not shown (What is the relationship between "Promotion slow but steady" and "Many different branches appeal to different interests"?) and there is no clear balance between the two columns (is "Security" supposed to balance "Low pay"?). In analyzing the columns, however, you can see that there are two main ideas in each: the financial aspect of an army career and the living conditions that go with army life. You might then balance the notes in this way:

I. Financial aspect

A. Disadvantages

1. Low pay
2. Cost of uniforms

B. Advantages

1. Security
2. Promotion slow but steady
3. Commissioned ranks open to men and women graduates
4. Can't be fired
5. Good retirement benefits
6. Annual vacation with pay
7. Military job training useful in civilian careers

II. Social aspect

A. Disadvantages

1. Discipline often annoying
2. Frequent moves hard on soldier's family
3. Social life restricted to small circle

B. Advantages

1. Many different branches appeal to different interests
2. See interesting places and people

Finding a Thesis

Arranging your notes in some system may help you decide on the main point you want to make in your paper. "The Army as a Career for College Men and Women" doesn't tell what you are going to say about the subject; it is a title, not a thesis.

At this stage you can see that there is more and stronger material on the financial advantages of a military career than on its disadvantages. On the other hand, the disadvantages of living conditions seem to outweigh the advantages. Assuming that you want to treat the subject fully and favorably, you could frame a tentative thesis statement: "Although there are definite disadvantages to any army career, the advantages outweigh them." This statement will now govern the reworking of the outline.

Revising the Outline

With the preliminary thesis as your guide, you can arrange the outline so that every part of it contributes directly to the purpose of the paper. Examine each heading to see if it needs to be strengthened or elaborated, if it repeats or overlaps another heading, or if it is unrelated to the central idea. In the first part of the outline, "Cost of uniforms" seems weak. Aren't officers given allowances for their uniforms? Career officers are expected to entertain. Perhaps "Expense of frequent entertaining" is stronger, so substitute it for "Cost of uniforms."

The financial advantages of an army career seem to stand out, but looking at these entries carefully, you will see that some overlap or are actually minor parts of other points. The heading "Security" covers "Slow but steady promotion" ("Commissioned ranks open to men and women graduates" might be added to that point), and "Can't be fired." Closer examination reveals that "Annual vacation with pay" is an aspect of living conditions rather than finances. It should, therefore, be shifted to the second main heading.

Under "Advantages" in the second main heading, the first entry, "Many different branches appeal to different interests," seems incorrectly phrased. Perhaps the point is that military people may be able to find jobs they like or are best qualified for.

As the plan now stands, the first part seems stronger. To make the argument more convincing, it would be a good idea to reverse the present order: begin with "Living conditions" and end the paper on an emphatic note—the training that the army affords for success in other fields.

After these changes have been made, and after some headings have been reworded to make them parallel in form, the final outline might look like this:

Thesis statement: Despite problems with living conditions and finances, college men and women can find satisfactory careers in the army.

I. Living conditions

A. Disadvantages

1. Discipline often annoying
2. Frequent moves hard on family
3. Social life restricted to a small circle

B. Advantages

1. Opportunity to find the job one is suited for
2. Annual leaves with pay
3. Chance to travel, to see new places, and to meet new people

II. Financial considerations

A. Disadvantages

1. Low pay
2. Frequent entertaining is expensive

B. Advantages

1. Security
 - a. Slow but steady promotion, including commissions for men and women graduates
 - b. Permanent employment
 - c. Good retirement benefits
2. Preparation for success in civilian careers after retirement from the military

The outline now can be the basis for an orderly paper that makes a definite point. It can also serve as a guide for a reader of the finished essay.

SENTENCE OUTLINE

A sentence outline is developed in the same way as a topic outline, but the ideas are more fully stated. Each heading is expressed as a complete sentence, usually, but not always, consisting of just one main clause.

Thesis statement: Though many students from middle-income families must struggle to meet college costs, low-income students suffer even more because of the ways in which colleges and federal agencies distribute aid, advertise it, analyze students' needs, and "package" the aid provided.

- I. College costs often exceed what middle-income families can comfortably afford.
- II. But low-income students face greater obstacles to higher education than middle-income students do.
 - A. Federal programs now work to the disadvantage of low-income students.
 1. With funding for grants "disproportionately lower" than funding for loans, fear of heavy debt makes low-income students unwilling to borrow.
 2. The half-cost rule hurts low-income students more than it helps middle-income students.
 3. Besides cutbacks in federal aid to education, cutbacks and restrictions in other federal programs also penalize low-income students.
 - B. Colleges are generally neglecting low-income students.
 1. Better-off students are squeezing out low-income students even at public and community colleges.
 2. Competing for students from middle-income families, some colleges are granting aid to students who don't truly need it.
 3. The gap between the cost of college and the value of aid—including aid from the college itself—forces low-income students into overly demanding combinations of work and study.
- III. Without spending substantially more, colleges and federal agencies can and should give low-income students a better chance.
 - A. The federal government should eliminate the half-cost rule in the distribution of Pell Grants.
 - B. The Department of Education should advertise its aid programs more effectively.
 - C. Colleges and federal agencies alike should analyze every student's needs more rigorously.
 - D. They should also increase the value of grants in packages of aid designed for low-income students.
- IV. Conclusion: All of these steps can help to insure that truly needy students get the educational opportunities they deserve.

A full-sentence outline allows you to see exactly where you are headed from the beginning of the paper to the end. As an ordered structure of assertions that work together to support the thesis, this kind of outline plainly defines the writer's argumentative strategy. And the sentences are likely to be included in the draft of the paper, facilitating an efficient transition from outline to essay. Note these criteria of a sentence outline: each heading is a complete, single sentence, not two or three; each sentence is in the form of a statement, not a question; all the sentences are in the same tense.