



THE WRITING PROCESS

Guidelines for Outlining

Outlining is generally considered to be a particularly useful activity in academic writing as a means to help structure and organize the content of your paper and to visualize the logical progression of your argument. Begin with a working outline, often referred to as an informal or scratch outline, which serves to connect your preliminary research with the gradual formation of your ideas.

A working outline helps you to shape your paper in relation to your purpose in writing and to have a better understanding of the relationship among the various sections. Your outline is continuously revised during the research process as you formulate your topic and point of view, enlisting common organizing principles such as chronology, cause and effect, and process as well as deductive and inductive logic.

Once you frame an appropriate thesis statement for your paper, you can begin to transform a working outline into a formal outline that categorizes the information you have gathered into levels of subordination, showing main points, supporting ideas, and specific details. A formal outline serves as an organizational plan that accentuates the development of your paper; likewise, it provides an opportunity to review the progression of your argument and to evaluate whether the presentation of your research is logical, coherent, and effective.

STANDARD OUTLINE FORMAT

Whereas a working or informal outline can take many forms, a formal outline usually follows standard guidelines regarding format and content, including elements of division and subdivision, indentation, capitalization and punctuation, and parallel grammatical form. The most common forms of outlining are the **topic outline** (using short phrases) or the **sentence outline** (using complete sentences).

Elements of Division and Subdivision

Begin your formal outline with your thesis statement: the single sentence that formulates the topic of your paper and your point of view. The primary divisions of your paper that list your major points are indicated by roman numerals (I, II, III). These points are subdivided by using in descending order: capital letters (A, B, C), arabic numerals (1, 2, 3), lower-case letters (a, b, c), and further subdivision, if necessary, using arabic numerals and lower-case letters in parentheses.

Note: It is important to remember that logic requires that there be a "II" to complement a "I," a "B" to complement an "A," and so forth.

Sample Format: Labeling Parts of an Outline

Thesis: _____

_____.

- I.
 - A.
 - 1.
 - a.
 - (1)
 - (a)
 - (b)
 - (2)
 - b.
 - 2.
 - B.
- II.

Indentation

The primary divisions of an outline (roman numerals) are set flush with the left-hand margin. Align like-numbered or like-lettered headings under one another. Each subdivision (as listed above) is indented five spaces or tabbed from the previous element. When a heading runs more than one line, the second line is indented as far as the first word of the preceding line:

- I. The photoelectric cell, known as the "electric eye," has been put to a variety of everyday, practical uses.
 - A. It is used in elevator floors to enable the elevator to stop at exactly the right level.

Avoid overelaborate and confusing outlines. For in-class writing and short papers, division by two levels of headings is usually sufficient. Even for longer, more complex papers, there is rarely any need to go further than the third subdivision (a, b, c).

Punctuation and Capitalization

In a **topic outline**, capitalize only the first letter of the word beginning the heading (and all proper nouns); do not use end punctuation because these headings are not complete sentences.

- I. Present need for physicists
 - A. In private industry
 - B. In government projects

In a **sentence outline**, punctuate every heading just as you would the sentences in your paper: begin with a capital letter and end with a period. Except for proper nouns, the words in the heading are not capitalized (a heading is not a title).

- I. Although a general course of study may allow students to more fully explore their educational options, the advantages of specialization in college are many.
 - A. Students can practice setting professional goals.
 - B. They can obtain more knowledge about their subjects.

Parallel Grammatical Form

Each heading in an outline should be specific and meaningful. Headings such as "Introduction," "Body," and "Conclusion" are not useful unless you indicate what material belongs in the sections. Instead of using general labels such as "Causes" and "Results," provide more detailed information.

Putting headings in the form of questions or in statements that will have to be filled in later is not an efficient habit. The necessary information will have to be supplied when you write, so you might as well supply it in the planning stage.

Indefinite

- I. The Wars of the Roses
 - A. When they began
 - B. Why?

Definite

- I. The Wars of the Roses
 - A. Started 1455
 - B. Caused by rivalry between Houses of York and Lancaster

Avoid using unnecessary divisions under a single heading. Each division should be logical and informative.

Unnecessary division

- I. The Smithsonian Institution
 - A. Established by an Englishman
 - 1. James Smithson
 - a. In 1846

Logical division

- I. The Smithsonian Institution
 - A.. Established by James Smithson, an Englishman, in 1846

The heads of an outline should represent equally important divisions of the subject as a whole, and should be parallel in grammatical form and tense. In a topic outline, if “I” is a noun, “II” and “III” are also nouns; if “I” is a prepositional phrase, so are “II” and “III.” The same principle applies to subdivisions. Likewise, a sentence outline should use complete sentences throughout and not lapse into topic headings.

Unequal headings

- I. Growing roses
 - A. Basic steps
 - 1. Growing the plant
 - 2. Mildew
 - 3. Insect pests
 - 4. Using a spray gun

Equal headings

- I. Growing roses
 - A. Basic steps
 - 1. Planting
 - 2. Watering
 - 3. Fertilizing
 - 4. Spraying
-

The subdivisions should also designate equally important and parallel divisions of one phase of the main divisions.

Unequal subheads

- I. Job opportunities in Wisconsin
 - A. Raising crops
 - B. White-collar work
 - C. Dairy farms
 - D. Factory jobs
 - E. Breweries

Equal subheads

- I. Job opportunities in Wisconsin
 - A. Agriculture
 - B. Business
 - C. Industry
-

Headings of equal rank should not overlap; what is in “II” should exclude what is covered in “I”; “B” should be clearly distinct from “A.”

Overlapping

- I. Transporting Freight
 - A. Water
 - 1. Ships
 - 2. Freighters
 - B. On the ground
 - 1. Trucks
 - 2. “Piggyback” in trucks
 - C. Railroads
 - D. In the air

Accurate

- I. Transporting Freight
 - A. Ship
 - 1. Passenger ships
 - 2. Freighters
 - B. Truck
 - C. Railroad
 - 1. Loaded into cars
 - 2. “Piggyback” in trucks
 - D. Airplane