

# JOHNSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

## Outlining the Five-Paragraph Essay

After you have chosen a topic for an expository essay, your next task is to determine what you are going to write in the paper and in what order. Before you begin to write anything, organize the material. For shorter pieces of writing—up to two paragraphs—the order of what is to be said can easily be handled in your head. Also, in some longer papers, especially narrative and descriptive, you can usually follow either sequential or spatial order quite easily without the aid of an outline. An effective expository or persuasive paper, though, is difficult to write well without a plan for its order; thus, once you have determined the thesis for the essay, the next step is to outline the supporting material. The two most useful methods of outlining a paper are the informal, or “scratch,” and the formal, which is either a topic or a sentence outline.

### The Informal Outline

The informal outline consists of ideas jotted down in words, phrases, and sometimes even sentences. You need pay little or no attention to numbering or lettering the divisions and subdivisions. This kind of outline is most suitable when the paper will be relatively short and when you must write the essay in class. As a result, more time can be spent on the actual composition of the paper. The following is an example of an informal outline.

### Sample Outline

#### Westerns

Proposed thesis: Most American westerns are characterized by monotonous plots, stereotyped characters, and oversimplified themes.\*

1. Monotonous plots—always standard situation, gunfights, chases, hero wrongly accused, spends most of the plot clearing his good name.
2. Stereotyped characters—hero, epitome of good guy, dresses and speaks well; villain, paragon of evil, dresses and speaks poorly; barmaid, “heart of gold,” immoral, but not really; sidekick for hero.
3. Simplified themes—clichés such as “cattle rustling doesn’t pay,” “good always wins out over evil,” etc. Often, a great deal of violence is the solution to problems; violence is related to themes.

\*The above thesis is a good example of an Aristotelian thesis where the subject is broken down into three parts and stated specifically.

## The Formal Outline

The formal outline is helpful in organizing a paper of five hundred words or more. This outline consists of words, phrases, or sentences organized by numbers and letters to show the order and importance of the developmental ideas. You should be aware of and follow certain conventions of the formal outline: spacing, numbering and lettering, indenting, capitalizing, punctuation. These conventions are shown in the following sample outline format and explained by the discussion of them following it.

## Sample Outline Format

Title

Thesis sentence: Xxxx xxxx xxx xxxx xx xxxxx  
Xxxx xxx xx xxxxx xxxxx xxxx xxxx xxx xx.

### I. Xxxxx

#### A. Xxxxx xxxx

1. Xxxxx
2. Xxxxx
3. Xxxxx xxxx

#### B. Xxx xxxxx

1. Xxx
2. Xxxxxx
  - a. Xxxxxxx
  - b. Xxxxxxxxx
  - c. Xxxxxxxxx xxxx

#### C. Xxxxxxxxx

### II. Xxxxxxxxx xxxxx xxxxx

#### A. Xxxxxxx

#### B. Xxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx

1. Xxxxxxx
2. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

#### C. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

1. XXXXXXXX
  - a. XXXXXXXX
  - b. XXXXXXX

#### 2. XXXXXXX

#### D. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

1. XXXXX
2. XXXXX XXXXXXXX

**Spacing.** Center the title on the outline page. Double-space the thesis from the title, with the words Thesis Sentence flush with the left-hand margin of the outline. Double-space Roman numeral I. from the thesis sentence. Either single-space or double-space the body of the outline.

**Numbering, lettering, and indenting.** Number and letter the outline consistently throughout. Set the main Roman-numeral heads flush with the left-hand margin. Indent the subheads (capital letters, Arabic numerals, and lower-case letters) to fall directly under the first word of the preceding head.

**Capitalizing.** In a topic outline, capitalize only the first word of an individual entry; however, follow general capitalization rules for names of people, names of places, titles of publications, and so forth. In a sentence outline, capitalize the first word of the sentence and then follow the general rules for capitalizing.

**Punctuating.** In all formal outlines, place a period after each Roman numeral, capital letter, Arabic numeral, and lower-case letter. In the topic outline, do not punctuate the entries, unless the punctuation is intrinsic to the entry. In the sentence outline, punctuate all sentences as any complete sentence would be by using a period or other end punctuation, such as a question mark or exclamation point.

### The Topic Outline

It is the most common kind of formal outline and is made up of words and phrases that show the organizational plan of the paper. It serves the writer and the reader as a quick reference to the major and minor subdivisions of the essay. The following is an example of this type of outline.

### Sample Outline

#### Westerns

Thesis sentence: Nearly all westerns are characterized by monotonous plots, stereotyped characters, and simplified themes.

- I. Monotonous plots
  - A. Stock situation points to the theme
    - 1. Hero accused of crime
    - 2. Hero clears name
    - 3. Hero captures villain, wins girl, rides into the sunset
  - B. Obvious physical action
    - 1. Chase
    - 2. Fist fight
    - 3. Gun fight
- II. Stereotyped characters
  - A. Hero
    - 1. Speaks good English
    - 2. Well-dressed
    - 3. Paragon of virtue

- B. Villain
    1. Speaks rough, ungrammatical English
    2. Poorly dressed
    3. Epitome of evil
  - C. Barmaid
    1. Immoral by occupation
    2. Heart of Gold
    3. Helps the hero
  - D. Hero's sidekick
    1. Older than hero
    2. Secondary in prowess
    3. Available for dirty work
    4. Provides "humor"
- III. Simplified themes
- A. Themes expressed by clichés
    1. "Cattle rustling doesn't pay"
    2. "Good always triumphs over evil"
    3. "Arrogance leads to downfall; humility leads to victory"
  - B. Themes emphasize violence in solving problems
    1. Villain understands only a physical beating
    2. Hero can overcome villain because of God and Right

### The Sentence Outline

The formal sentence outline sums up the ideas that the writer will develop in each topic and subtopic. The major advantage of the sentence outline is that it forces the writer to construct sentences that will later be used, with minor revisions, in the essay. The following is an example of this type of outline.

### Sample Outline

#### Westerns

Thesis sentence. Nearly all westerns are characterized by monotonous plots, stereotyped characters, and simplified themes.

- I. The monotonous plots of the western almost always involve the same sequences.
  - A. A stock situation is introduced.
    1. The hero is wrongly accused of a crime.
    2. He clears his good name.
    3. He captures the villain, wins the girl, and rides into the sunset.
  - B. The plot is built around obvious physical action.
    1. The hero is involved in chases.
    2. The hero is involved in fistfights.
    3. The hero is involved in gunfights.
    4. The hero wins them all.

- II. Secondly, stereotyped characters are characteristic of the western.
  - A. First is the hero.
    - 1. He speaks good English.
    - 2. He is well dressed.
    - 3. He is a paragon of virtue.
  - B. On the other hand is the villain.
    - 1. He speaks rough, ungrammatical English.
    - 2. He dresses in dark, drab, wrinkled clothes.
    - 3. He is the epitome of general wickedness.
  - C. A minor stereotype is the barmaid.
    - 1. She is immoral by occupation.
    - 2. She has a heart of gold.
    - 3. She risks her own safety for the hero.
  - D. Another minor stereotype is the hero's sidekick.
    - 1. He is older than the hero.
    - 2. He is secondary to the hero in prowess.
    - 3. He is available for the dirty work.
    - 4. He provides "humor."
- III. Finally, simplified themes are characteristic of most westerns.
  - A. The themes are often expressed by clichés.
    - 1. One common theme is "Cattle rustling doesn't pay."
    - 2. Another common theme is "Good always triumphs over evil."
    - 3. A third common theme is "Arrogance leads to downfall; humility leads to victory."
  - B. Many of the themes tend to emphasize violence in the solution of problems.
    - 1. The villain seems to understand only a good physical beating.
    - 2. The hero can and will beat the hell out of the villain.
      - a. God is on the hero's side.
      - b. Right is on the hero's side.

The Topic Sentence Outline. The topic-sentence outline is a short, formal outline that uses only the topic sentences planned for the developmental paragraphs in the essay. The writer first formulates the thesis sentence and then constructs the topic sentences for each supporting paragraph. The writer will not further subdivide the outline. The following is an example of this type of outline.

### Sample Outline

#### Westerns

Thesis sentence: Nearly all westerns are characterized by monotonous plots, stereotyped characters, and simplified themes.

- I. The monotonous plots of the western almost always involve the same sequences.
- II. Secondly, stereotyped characters are characteristic of the western.
- III. Finally, simplified themes are characteristic of most westerns.

## Westerns

Many times things repeat themselves for the better, but this doesn't seem to apply to the popular fiction that is found in the book stores. Most popular fiction, such as detective stories, spy stories, and science fiction stories, are pretty much the same, but the authors will usually vary them and update them enough to make them at least readable. However, this doesn't seem to apply to the typical Western story. The adage "If you've seen one you've seen them all" is almost literally true, mainly because nearly all westerns are characterized by monotonous plots, stereotyped characters, and simplified themes.

The monotonous plots of the western almost always involve the same sequence. First, a stock situation is introduced that will ultimately point to the theme of the story. Always, it seems, the hero is wrongly accused of a heinous crime. He then spends the rest of the story clearing his good name. At the end, he will invariably capture the villain, win the girl he loves, and ride off into the sunset. Also, the plot is built around obvious physical action. The hero is involved in numerous chases, fist fights, and gun fights, all of which he wins.

Second, stereotyped characters are characteristic of the western. First, and most important, is the hero. He speaks good English, is well dressed (usually in light colors), and his moral bearing says that he is the paragon of virtue. The antithesis of the hero is the villain. He speaks rough, ungrammatical English, dresses in dark, drab, wrinkled clothes, and is the epitome of all the greed, lust, and general wickedness since the fall of Satan. A minor stereotype is the barmaid. She is immoral by occupation, but she has a heart of gold. She usually helps the good guy at the risk of her own safety. Another minor stereotype is the hero's sidekick. He is usually older than the hero, secondary to him in prowess, and available for the dirty work that the hero can't or won't do. The sidekick also provides what is roughly called "humor," because many times he plays the clown or serves as comic relief to the violence.

Finally, simplified themes are characteristic of most westerns. The themes are often expressed by clichés. The most common of these clichés are that "Cattle rustling doesn't pay," "Good always triumphs over evil," and "Arrogance leads to downfall; humility leads to victory." Also, many of the themes tend to emphasize violence in the solution of problems. For instance, the villain seems to understand only a good physical beating, and the hero can and will beat the hell out of the villain because God and Right are on the hero's side. The rule of the wild West seems to be that it is all right to be mean as long as "meanie" is honorable.

Thus, the purchase of a new western likely has nothing to do with "new." In the case of most westerns, it means simply that one has just bought the latest version of the same old plot, character, and theme.