WRITING CENTER

The Outline

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THE OUTLINE

After you have chosen a topic for an expository essay, the next task is to determine what you are going to write in the paper and in what order. For shorter pieces of writing—up to two paragraphs—the order can easily be handled in your head, and even in some longer papers, especially narrative and descriptive, you can usually follow the order without the aid of an outline. An effective expository or persuasive paper, though, is difficult to write well without a plan for its order. This is what an outline does for you. After creating the thesis, the next step is to outline the supporting material.

WHY OUTLINE?

1. To help develop your own writing:
    a. Clarify or determine the purpose of the proposed writing.
    b. Test organization.
    c. Aid to communicate and clarify to both the student and the professor what will be examined in the paper and how.
2. To help understand a required reading:
    a. Enables the student to carefully watch what the author is doing and how he or she is doing it.
    b. Provides the student a concise review for future study.

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THE CONVENTIONS OF OUTLINING

Outlines should consist of three parts: the title, the purpose statement (focus or thesis), and the body of the outline. The body of the outline should never just be:

I. Introduction
II. Body
III. Conclusion

Such an outline gives no indication what is intended and does not show the organization of the paper.

HOW TO DEVELOP AN OUTLINE OF A REQUIRED READING

1. Read the assigned source(s) for a general impression. Note opening paragraphs and headings for a clue to organization.
2. Formulate the purpose of the reading and write a thesis.
3. Determine the main divisions of your essay and mark them: I, II, III; A, B, C; or 1, 2, 3, depending on the outline style you have chosen.
4. Express the purpose of each major unit as a topic heading or sub-thesis. These headings should logically develop the main purpose statement.
5. Subdivide the main headings, if necessary, and mark these.
6. Check the completed outline against the original reading to see if your outline adequately reflects the reading's structure and content.

HOW TO CREATE AN OUTLINE IN MICROSOFT WORD

To avoid the considerable work of creating and maintaining a self-built outline, it is strongly recommended that you use the outline function in your preferred word-processing program, such as Microsoft Word.

1. Click **Home**.
2. In the **Paragraph** group, click the arrow next to the **Multilevel List** icon (third from the left in the top row).
3. Choose an outline style from the **List Library**. The first heading (A, 1, I, etc.) appears.
4. Start typing to begin the outline.
5. To start a new list level, press the **Increase Indent** icon (to the right of **Multilevel List**).
6. To return to the previous list level, press the **Decrease Indent** icon (to the left of **Increase Indent**).

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MODEL OUTLINE

The outline below is one of the outline styles from the **List Library** in Microsoft Word. The top level is represented by Roman numerals (I, II, III, IV, etc.); the next level is marked by lower case letters (a, b, c, etc.) Further levels are indicated by lowercase Roman numerals (i, ii, iii, etc.), then numbers again. This follows a progressive system of indention so that the relation and relative importance of topics may be seen at a glance.

<div align="center">

Title

</div>

Thesis sentence: (purpose statement or focus)

    I.   Heading or Main Topic of First Body Paragraph
        a. Subheading
            i. Example
                1. Further Example
                2. Further Example
            ii. Example
        b. Subheading
            i. Example
            ii. Example
    II. Heading or Main Topic of Second Body Paragraph
        a. Subheading
            i. Example
                1. Further Example
                2. Further Example
            ii. Example
        b. Subheading
            i. Example
            ii. Example
            iii. Example
   III. Heading or Main Topic Third Body Paragraph
        a. Subheading
         b. Subheading
            i. Example
            ii. Example

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A SIMPLIFIED OUTLINE EXAMPLE

The Divisions of Federal Authority

Thesis sentence: To show the main divisions of the federal government.
I. The Executive Branch
   a. The President
   b. The Cabinet
   c. Appointed authorities
II. The Legislative Branch
   a. The House of Representatives
   b. The Senate
III. The Judiciary Branch
   a. The Federal Courts
   b. The Supreme Court

WAYS TO STRUCTURE AN OUTLINE

Depending on the readings and/or type of paper, there are different ways to organize an outline. Here are some general tips:

- If the information is a time sequence, arrange the information chronologically (narrative mode).
- If the information is steps in a process, put the steps in the order in which they should be executed (process analysis).
- If you will be describing someone or something, the details should be arranged in a consistent order by space (descriptive mode).

The type of support you use to develop your paper—example and illustration, comparison and contrast, definition, or classification—will determine its structure. The order in which you place the information will then be one of the following:

- Most important to least important; or least important to most important
- Lesser known to greater-known fact; or greater known to lesser-known fact
- The particular to general (inductive); or the general to particular (deductive)
- Question and answer
- Causes and effects

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THE INFORMAL AND INFORMAL OUTLINE

Two other useful methods to outline a paper are the **informal**, or "scratch" outline, and the **formal** outline, 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 or 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.

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 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 in a hierarchy to show the order and importance of the developmental ideas.

Spacing

Center the title on the outline page. Double-space the thesis from the title, with the words **Thesis Sentence** (justified left). Double-space the first heading from the thesis sentence. Either single-space or double-space the body of the outline.

Numbering, lettering, and indenting

Automatic outline makers (such as in MS Word) define numbering, lettering, and indenting for you.

The Outline

If you are using a self-built outline, number and letter the outline consistently. Set the main heads flush with the left-hand margin and indent the subheads 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, etc. 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 heading and sub-heading. 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, with a period, question mark, or exclamation point.

THE TOPIC OUTLINE

This 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 gives the writer and the reader a quick reference to the major and minor subdivisions of the essay.

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
               i. Hero accused of crime
              ii. Hero clears name
            iii. Hero captures villain, wins girl, rides into the sunset
          b. Obvious physical action
               i. Chase
              ii. Fist fight
            iii. Gun fight
   II. Stereotyped characters

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   a. Hero
      i. Speaks good English
      ii. Well-dressed
      iii. Paragon of virtue
   b. Villain
      i. Speaks rough, ungrammatical English
      ii. Poorly dressed
      iii. Epitome of evil
   c. Barmaid
      i. Immoral by occupation
      ii. Heart of Gold
      iii. Helps the hero
   d. Hero's sidekick

III. Older than hero
      i. Secondary in prowess
      ii. Available for dirty work
      iii. Provides "humor"

IV. Simplified themes
   a. Themes expressed by clichés
      i. "Cattle rustling doesn't pay"
      ii. "Good always triumphs over evil"
      iii. "Arrogance leads to downfall; humility leads to victory"
   b. Themes emphasize violence in solving problems
      i. Villain understands only a physical beating
      ii. 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 the writer can construct sentences that can later be used in the essay.

Westerns

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

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I. The monotonous plots of the western almost always involve the same sequences.
  a. A stock situation is introduced.
    i. The hero is wrongly accused of a crime.
    ii. He clears his good name.
    iii. He captures the villain, wins the girl, and rides into the sunset.
  b. The plot is built around obvious physical action.
    i. The hero is involved in chases.
    ii. The hero is involved in fistfights.
    iii. The hero is involved in gunfights.
    iv. The hero wins them all.
II. Secondly, stereotyped characters are characteristic of the western.
  a. First is the hero.
    i. He speaks good English.
    ii. He is well dressed.
    iii. He is a paragon of virtue.
  b. On the other hand is the villain.
    i. He speaks rough, ungrammatical English.
    ii. He dresses in dark, drab, wrinkled clothes.
    iii. He is the epitome of general wickedness.
  c. A minor stereotype is the barmaid.
    i. She is immoral by occupation.
    ii. She has a heart of gold.
    iii. She risks her own safety for the hero.
  d. Another minor stereotype is the hero's sidekick.
    i. He is older than the hero.
    ii. He is secondary to the hero in prowess.
    iii. He is available for the dirty work.
    iv. He provides "humor."
III. Finally, simplified themes are characteristic of most westerns.
  a. The themes are often expressed by clichés.
    i. One common theme is "Cattle rustling doesn't pay."
    ii. Another common theme is "Good always triumphs over evil."
    iii. 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.

        i. The villain seems to understand only a good physical beating.
            1. God is on the hero's side.
            2. 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 sentences and then constructs the topic sentences for each supporting paragraph. The writer will not further subdivide the 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.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Make sure the outline is sound by asking the following questions. These will test the outline and the proposed essay for organization, clarity, and development of the thesis.

1. **Is the thesis or purpose statement satisfactory?**
   A thesis is satisfactory when it describes what the paper will be about and/or what the student is claiming or arguing.
2. **Is there a clear relationship among the parts of the outline?**
   Every part of the outline must relate back to the thesis or main claim of the paper. If any part of the paper does not do this, then it is likely superfluous or poorly developed and must be reexamined.
3. **Is the outline sufficiently developed?**
   Every entry in an outline should be necessary to the paper; no entry should appear unless the student intends to develop it.