

Chapter 31

Outlines

Outlines serve several purposes, primarily as summaries for something we have read or are about to develop into a paper or speech, but also as notes for lectures or classes. They are somewhat like skeletons: the bare bones on which to hang the muscle of a composition or content review. Some outlines follow a rigid formality, thus sometimes intimidating writers. Other outlines, sometimes called "scratch outlines," lack the formal structure for use by anyone other than the writer. In either case, an outline in reality is merely a list that shows the arrangement of details. In this chapter, you look at an outline as a summary of reading matter, in preparation for a paper, and in preparation for a speech. While all follow the general characteristics, each takes a slightly different approach to suit its purpose.

CHARACTERISTICS

The outline includes certain characteristics. An outline

- includes a title,
- may begin with a thesis statement or, in the case of a speech, an introductory statement,
- includes topics or sentences, but not both,
- follows a parallel structure [*see parallel structure in the Glossary*],
- uses a combination of Roman numerals, upper- and lowercase letters, and Arabic numbers to show relationships,
- shows the logic of development so that the summary of the parts of any one subdivision equals the topic of that division,
- includes topics that are mutually exclusive,
- includes at least two divisions at any level so that an item designated *1* will be followed by *2*, and an item designated *a* will be followed by *b*,
- guides the paragraph structure of a written paper, with each main idea or subheading representing a separate paragraph,
- uses periods and parentheses to set number and letter designations apart from the outline topics or sentences,
- follows a pattern of indentation to show the relationship of ideas,
- capitalizes only the first word of each topic in a topic outline,
- omits periods after topics in a topic outline,

- capitalizes the first word of the sentence in a sentence outline,
- includes a period at the end of each sentence in a sentence outline.

A fully developed outline that includes numerous details should follow the pattern shown below:

Title

- I.
 - A.
 - B.
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - C.
 - 1.
 - 2.
- II.
 - A.
 - 1.
 - a.
 - b.
 - 2.
 - B.
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - a.
 - 1)
 - 2)
 - a)
 - b)
 - 3)
 - b.
 - 3.
- III.
 - A.
 - B.

Note that the preceding sample outline illustrates characteristics peculiar to the form:

- The Roman numerals have a ragged left margin so that the periods after them align vertically.

- The number-letter designation follows this pattern:
 - Roman numerals
 - Capital letters
 - Arabic numbers
 - Lowercase letters
 - Arabic numbers followed by closing parenthesis
 - Lowercase letters followed by closing parenthesis
- Each number or letter is followed by a period or a closing parenthesis.
- Each level is represented by equal indentation. Thus, all items designated by a capital letter appear at the same left margin.
- The total of the subpoints equals the main point. Thus, in the section labeled with a Roman numeral II, item B equals the total of subpoints 1, 2, and 3. Likewise, item 2 equals the total of subpoints a and b, and item a equals the total of subpoints 1), 2), and 3).
- Divisions should be mutually exclusive. For instance, if you divide *college students* into *male*, *female*, and *nontraditional*, then you have a problem with mutual exclusion. *Nontraditional students*, those older than most, are either *male* or *female*. The divisions overlap. To solve the problem, divide *college students* into *traditional* and *nontraditional*. Those two subdivisions could in turn be divided into *male* and *female*. Then each division is mutually exclusive.
- Because outlines follow a parallel structure, you should note that items within categories are parallel to each other. Thus items listed after Roman numerals must be parallel. In addition, items A, B, and C in I must be parallel, but they need not be parallel with A and B in either II or III. [See parallel structure in *the Glossary*.]

These general characteristics should help you develop an outline to meet the most demanding needs. Follow every detail with exceeding care if you are submitting a formal outline as part of a paper. Pay less attention to details if you are taking notes for your eyes only.

Recognizing those acceptable differences, this section focuses on the specific purposes of outlines and how you can develop outlines for each of those purposes.

AS A SUMMARY

Frequently, as you read or listen, you need to take notes. While the approach to note-taking varies from individual to individual and situation to situation, one form of note-taking is outlining.

The outline, while rather formal in appearance, permits a writer to show relationships among ideas. By keeping track of those relationships as they develop, either as you read or listen, you can always see how one idea relates to another or how an example explains a general concept.

PROCESS

The process of taking notes by means of an outline is only slightly different from taking any other kind of notes. The biggest difference is form.

STEP 1: Prewriting—Getting an Overview

If you are taking notes from reading matter, skim the chapter or section and pick out its main points. Look for headings, subheadings, section summaries, chapter summaries. Read them, in a process sometimes called surveying, to get an overall idea of what to expect. Write down headings and subheadings, perhaps on separate sheets of paper, allowing ample space for supporting details. While some people take notes at the keyboard, there is a tendency then to write too much and to write it in the language of the reading material. You'll do better to write in your own words.

If you are taking notes in class, be prepared, having previously studied the assignment. Notes you take on reading matter will prepare you for outlining in class. Some students, in fact, like to outline assigned reading in a notebook using the left-hand side of the page and outline parallel in-class notes on the right-hand side of the page.

If you are taking notes from a lecture, listen carefully for the speaker's clues. He or she may say something like, "This afternoon we will discuss three methods for approaching the potentially irate client." You know, then, to look for three main ideas. In addition, listen for clues such as *first*, *second*, *one of the reasons*, *another*, and other similar transitional devices that signal main and supporting ideas.

Having a general overview should help you determine which supporting details belong with which main ideas.

STEP 2: Writing—Showing Relationships among Ideas

Designate main headings by Roman numerals. As you read or hear about details that support or explain those main ideas, list them as subheadings, using capital letters. If additional supporting examples or illustrations appear as support for the subheadings, then indent for another "layer" of details.

Listing topics in their appropriate levels of relationship should help you better understand the material you are studying.

STEP 3: Revising and Proofreading—Checking for Accuracy

As you reread your outline, think about the relationships of ideas as your outline expresses them. For instance, start with the supporting ideas in one section. Do the ideas listed as subpoints really explain the topic under which you have them listed? In other words, do subtopics 1, 2, and 3 under B really illustrate, explain, list the parts, or make up the whole of topic B?

If you find illogical levels of support, revise the outline until you are certain it accurately reflects what you have read or heard.

SAMPLE OUTLINE AS A SUMMARY

The following outline summarizes reading material. For comparison's sake, this sample shows the outline first in topic form and then in sentence form. Use whichever best serves your purpose.

Topic Outline

Birds as Insect Controllers

- I. How birds help
 - A. Have high metabolism rate
 - B. Eat nearly twice weight
 - 1. 3-ounce to 5½-ounce ratio in birds
 - 2. 10-pound to 18½-pound ratio in humans
- II. How environment helps
 - A. Vegetation
 - 1. Windbreaks
 - 2. Living fences
 - 3. Shrub buffers
 - B. Water
 - 1. Farm ponds
 - 2. Grass waterways

Sentence Outline

Birds as Insect Controllers

- I. Birds eat insects.
 - A. The birds have a high metabolism rate.
 - B. The birds eat almost twice their own weight.
 - 1. A 3-ounce baby bird will eat 5½ ounces of insects.
 - 2. A 10-pound human baby would have to eat 18½ pounds of food.

- II. The environment attracts birds.
 - A. Planting the right vegetation attracts birds.
 - 1. Windbreaks provide birds protection.
 - 2. Living fences provide birds nesting and roosting sites.
 - 3. Shrub buffers provide birds protection.
 - B. Developing water sources attracts birds.
 - 1. Farm ponds provide birds with water and food.
 - 2. Grass waterways attract birds of different varieties.

ANALYSIS OF THE SAMPLE OUTLINE AS A SUMMARY

The preceding sample outline, which appears in both topic and sentence form, should help you see the importance of an outline in showing relationships among ideas. Notice these characteristics about the two forms of the outline above:

- Each of the main headings is supported by two subheadings. Although such perfectly even distribution is not essential, it does indicate that the note taker has not given undue attention to one main idea while neglecting the others.
- Each division includes at least two items, thus following the logic that nothing can be divided into less than two.
- The subtopics, taken together, explain, illustrate, or provide other supporting detail to fully develop their respective main topics.
- Both the topic and sentence outline follow a parallel structure. Note that the main headings are parallel and that the subheadings are structurally parallel with the other subheadings in that same division. [See parallel structure in *the Glossary*.]
- The outlines use proper punctuation and indentation.
- The number-letter combinations establish relationships between and among ideas.
- The topic outline uses capital letters for only the first word in each topic.
- The topic outline does not include periods after the topics.
- The sentence outline follows the rules of capitalization for any sentence, and of course, each sentence ends with a period.

FOR A PAPER

Writing an outline for a paper requires a different thought process than writing an outline as a summary. When you outline as a summary, you reduce someone else's ideas to a bare-bones skeleton; however, when you outline in preparation for a paper, you must generate the bare-bones skeleton and then add the muscle. The process demands your creativity.

Developing a formal outline may not be necessary for all papers, but you will almost always develop a kind of outline, even if it is nothing but a loose listing of ideas you want to include. You will notice throughout this book, in the course of the prewriting work, we develop lists. We do not call them outlines, but in fact they are scratch outlines. To make them into formal outlines requires adding only the formality: the proper number-letter combinations, indentation pattern, capitalization and punctuation necessities, and parallel structures.

Study now the process for turning a loose listing into a formal outline.

PROCESS

Assume, for the sake of practicality, that you are about to write a paper that requires a formal outline. It might be a research paper, a technical paper, or a long paper of unusual formality. Follow these steps for developing the outline.

STEP 1: Prewriting—Looking at the Lists

As you work through the prewriting stages of your paper, you will develop one or more lists. From these lists you will develop your outline. One list may include your main points. You probably have put that list into some kind of order. [See organization in the Glossary for an explanation of the main kinds of order.] You may have another list of the supporting details you plan to use to explain your main ideas: illustrations, examples, and so forth. These lists, reorganized and rearranged, will make up the outline.

STEP 2: Writing—Putting the Lists into Outline Form

Begin by writing your thesis statement. [See thesis statement in the Glossary.] The prewriting activities for the particular kind of paper will have helped you develop that statement.

Next, list your main ideas either on separate sheets of paper or on a single sheet with ample space beneath each main topic. Designate these main ideas with Roman numerals.

Now begin adding the items from your list of supporting details, the A, B, C part. Quite likely, an outline for a five-paragraph paper will go no farther than the second level of division. If you do have supporting ideas listed that actually develop a second-level topic, such as 1 and 2 to develop A, then of course you will want to add them.

For a five-paragraph theme, you should have no more than three Roman numerals. For a longer paper, you should have a separate Roman numeral for each main idea you will develop, five, six, or even more. Two hints:

1. The introduction and conclusion generally do not appear on the outline.
2. The Roman numerals usually represent body paragraphs. Thus, three Roman numerals designate three body paragraphs in a five-paragraph theme. [See Writing a Multi-Paragraph Paper in *Chapter 2, Writing, for a complete discussion.*]

Consider these possible problems:

- You may have designated something less than a main idea by a Roman numeral. If you cannot develop at least a full paragraph for each Roman numeral, you have divided illogically.
- Your topic may be too broad. As a result, your main topics may include far more material than you can support in a single paragraph. While subheadings can also designate independent paragraphs, they usually do not, except in particularly long papers.

Note: When subheadings designate independent paragraphs, the main headings under which they appear do not represent paragraphs. For instance:

- I. Traditional college students
 - A. Male
 - B. Female
- II. Nontraditional college students
 - A. Male
 - B. Female

If you develop one paragraph *for traditional male students* and another for *traditional female students*, then the two paragraphs together equal the topic represented in the Roman numeral designation I.

STEP 3: Revising—Polishing the Outline

When you have listed all the supporting ideas in logical order under their respective topics, you are ready to polish the outline. Ask yourself the following questions about logic and organization:

- Together, do the main headings provide adequate support for the thesis sentence?
- Are the divisions logical? Are the items within a division mutually exclusive?
- Is the outline a suitable skeleton on which to build a paper? If you develop paragraphs according to the main headings or subheadings in the outline, will you have a satisfactory development of your paper?

STEP 4: Proofreading—Checking the Peculiar Details

When the content is accurately and logically represented, you should attend to the peculiar characteristics of the outline form itself. Check these points:

- Does the outline follow a parallel structure?
- Are the number-letter combinations in correct sequence?
- Is each number or letter followed by a period and, in the case of fifth-level divisions or greater, by a parenthesis?
- Does each topic or sentence begin with a capital letter?
- Is the indentation accurate and consistent?
- Does each sentence in a sentence outline end with a period? (And, by the same token, are periods omitted after topics in a topic outline?)
- Are sentences in a sentence outline structured accurately and punctuated appropriately?
- Is spelling accurate throughout?

When you can answer “yes” to all these questions, you should have an accurate outline.

SAMPLE OUTLINE FOR A PAPER

The following outline was used to develop the cause-and-effect sample paper for social studies. [See Sample for Social Sciences in Chapter 6, *Cause and Effect*.]

Isle Royale's Riches

Thesis: Only three natural resources have merited man's battle with Isle Royale's isolation and climate.

- I. Lumber
 - A. Destroyed by flood
 - B. Halted by fire
- II. Fish
 - A. Commercial activity
 - B. Individual activity
 - 1. Decline by unknown causes
 - 2. Decline by man-made causes
- III. Copper
 - A. Indian miners
 - B. White settlers

ANALYSIS OF THE SAMPLE OUTLINE FOR A PAPER

The preceding sample illustrates the general characteristics of an outline used to develop a paper, in this case a five-paragraph theme. [See Writing a Multi-Paragraph Paper in Chapter 2, *Writing*.] Note these particular features:

- The thesis statement, which also appears as the last sentence in the introductory paragraph of the paper, serves as a guide to the writer. It sets a tone (*battle with isolation and climate*) and suggests the kinds of details needed.
- Introductory paragraph matter does not appear in the outline.
- The three main divisions, designated by the Roman numerals, suggest the body paragraphs of the paper. [Compare the outline's divisions with the actual paper in Sample for Social Sciences, Chapter 6, *Cause and Effect*.]
- The outline indicates the order of development: the first body paragraph will discuss the lumber industry; the second, the fishing industry; the third, the copper industry. The order is one of importance, the most important last.
- Each of the main divisions is structurally parallel, each being a noun.
- The first level of a division, designated by a capital letter, represents the subtopic sentence of each paragraph. The paper's first body paragraph will discuss the flood that ruined the first business attempt by the lumber industry; then it will discuss the fire that destroyed the second attempt.
- Each pair of subtopics is parallel, but the three pairs are not (and need not be) parallel to each other.
- Each body paragraph includes two subtopics, A and B; one subtopic includes two subtopics of its own, 1 and 2.
- The outline suggests that the three body paragraphs will include nearly equal amounts of detail. Thus, the writer assures a balanced development.
- The conclusion does not appear in the outline.

FOR A SPEECH

Although the outline for a speech resembles—logically so—the outline for a paper, most speech instructors suggest a few additional details that help the speaker deliver a successful extemporaneous speech. Think through the following process.

PROCESS

Although this handbook is not designed to help you prepare a speech, we can certainly help you write a suitable outline that in turn may at least start you in the right direction!