

Outlines

Outlines are a useful way of thinking about and organizing a paper. They're a formal system of jotting down ideas to see how they look on paper, whether they connect with one another, which might come first, which second, and so on. Some writers use outlines for just about every piece of writing they do. Others use them only when they are working on a long, complicated piece and want a guide to tell them where to go next. However you use them, outlines are done only to help the writer; the reader normally never sees them.

There are two kinds of outline: the topic outline and the sentence outline. The topic outline consists of short phrases—helpful when you are dealing with a number of different issues which could be arranged in a variety of ways in your paper.

In contrast, the sentence outline is written with full sentences. It's normally used when your paper focuses on complex details. The sentence outline is especially handy for this kind of paper because sentences can have many details in them, and this kind of outline allows you to include the details without having to go on page after page.

There's no rule as to which outline is best, topic or sentence. Use the kind that seems to best cover your material and topic (or the one assigned by your instructor), and whichever one you choose, use it throughout your outline. That is, don't make some categories topic and others sentence—stay with one kind for the entire outline.

Both topic and sentence outlines follow very rigid formats. The traditional format uses Roman and Arabic numerals, along with capital and small letters of the alphabet. This is the kind of outline most commonly used for classroom papers and speeches. If, however, you were doing a technical report for government or industry, you would use an outline that followed the decimal format. This format uses only numbers, indicating each category by a system of numbers and decimals.

Making a Traditional Outline

To make an outline for a paper, first decide on your topic. For example, if I were making an outline for this handout, my topic would be "How to Make an Outline." Next, decide what you're going to talk about first. In this handout, the first thing I do is tell what outlines are, so that would be my first category. Once I've identified a general category, I look to see if it can be broken down more. The identification section of the handout is very brief, and since I don't have much to say here, I can't really break it down, so I leave this and go on to my next

general category, in which I talk about how outlines are used. I have more to say here, and so I break it down into smaller units noting the three uses of the outline that I intend to write about. In my fourth category (IV) I have even more to say, so I break it down even further.

Note that the number of categories you use depends only on the amount of information that you're going to cover—there's no right or wrong number to use. List as many as needed to indicate what you are going to write about and the order in which you are going to write.

By convention, each category must consist of a minimum of two entries. In other words, if your first category is Roman numeral I, your outline must also have a category labeled Roman numeral II; if you have a capital letter A under category I, you must also have a capital letter B. Whether or not you then go on to have a capital letter C, D, E, and so on is up to you and depends on the amount of material you're going to cover. You are only required to have two of each numbered or lettered category.

Once I've done everything, my completed topic outline should look like this:

I. What an outline is

II. Uses of outlines

- A. For jotting down ideas
- B. For seeing connections
- C. For determining overall order

III. Kinds of Outlines

A. Topic outline

- 1. Consists of key phrases
- 2. Often used where material is complex and could go in a number of different places in a paper

B. Sentence outline

- 1. Consists of sentences
- 2. Often used to focus on details, since sentences contain many of the details of the paper

IV. Format of outlines

A. Traditional

- 1. Uses Roman and Arabic numerals
- 2. Uses capital and small letters of the alphabet
- 3. Most often used for non-technical classroom writing

B. Decimal

- 1. Uses only numbers
- 2. Preferred system for government and industry

V. Making the outline

- A. General comments
- B. Specific example