

RESEARCH METHODS

Here you discuss the overall plan for your research. Research encompasses many types of information gathering, so for this portion of the prospectus, you will determine the nature of the research you will be conducting. Here are some questions you may ask: What types of sources will you be using, and will you need help from colleagues, professors, or library staff to gather them? Will you be using traditional library research, or will you need to conduct surveys and experiments to support your final thesis? Will you need funding and, if so, where will you secure it? What is your timeline for the research?

OUTLINE

The next step in the paper-writing process is crucial, whether you're writing an extended research project, a personal narrative, or even an in-class essay. It's the outline. This is the step that most students skip and consider a waste of time, whereas, ironically, it is the biggest time saver and tool for quality assurance in writing. Many writers find that while facing an immediate due date, the simple act of scrawling several major points they intend to cover and in what order they intend to cover them makes a significant difference in the quality of the final paper and actually makes writing it faster.

Think of your outline as the blueprint for your paper. Just as an architect would never turn the construction of a house over to the contractors without perfect blueprints detailing every aspect of construction, you should never start your draft until you have a blueprint of your own. Similar to note taking, your outline is a message to your future self. You're doing this work now so you don't have to do even more work later. Consider when you're six pages into writing the draft of a ten-page paper, and you have just run out of things to say. You can either panic and spend another hour pouring over note cards and wondering what you originally had in mind, or—if you've done some planning—you can look at a well-developed outline. That outline will tell you exactly what point you should make next and exactly what quotation or paraphrase to use, and you can keep writing without interruption. It's a very secure feeling knowing that you have that blueprint to fall back on.

Next we show several ways to construct an outline.

Casual/Scratch Outline

The first type of outline, a **casual or scratch outline**, is simply a brief sketch of what you'd like to put in your paper. If an instructor asks you for a formal outline (see the section "Formal Outline"), a casual outline might even be your first step in constructing that type of outline. Creating a casual outline is a great way to plan for quick in-class writing for short essay answers on tests. A casual outline may consist of a quick list or a series of keywords, but it seldom consists of complete sentences (or even complete thoughts).

Casual outlines are commonly used before or during the research process. You might want a quick overview of your major ideas, so you know what to start researching. Similarly, this type of outline may be the result of a solid afternoon at a library. Outside sources may have given you these ideas in the first place, so you draft a quick outline to help you continue your research and your thought-generation process. Following is

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an example of a casual outline. (This outline was used in researching the sample MLA format research paper beginning on page 255.)

RESEARCH PAPER: CORPORATE MASS MEDIA OWNERSHIP

- History of American corporations
- Early American corporations
- Modern American corporate mergers
- Federal Communications Commission
- Mergers of communications corporations
- Freedom of speech
- Examples of faulty news reporting

Informal Outline

An **informal outline** is the intermediate step between the casual and formal outlines. It has far more detail and structure than a casual outline, but it's still largely intended to be seen only by the writer. The informal outline is still a sketch at times, leaving out some of the minor points that will be in the paper and focusing instead on the major arguments you intend to make. You might use a series of numbers to delineate your points, and you might even include some major quotations or your initial thesis statement. This is a good choice when you don't have to turn an outline in, but you still need those blueprints to base your draft on. You may still have questions about your topic, specific arguments, and thesis at the outlining stage. Don't worry, the answers will come when you write the draft. Informal outlines are likely to change significantly during the writing process. Ultimately, they can provide either the final outline you use for a brief paper or the early draft of a formal outline that will come together later in the writing process.

Following is an example of an informal outline. Note that, like a casual outline, an informal outline doesn't require complete sentences or correct grammar: fragments and incomplete thoughts are fine, as long as you'll understand them later. This is still a somewhat vague outline at times, but it's plenty to sink your teeth into while you're still doing research or preparing a very rough draft. (This outline was used early in the writing process of the sample MLA format research paper found on page 255.)

INFORMAL OUTLINE

Thesis: Today, modern corporations' power over the media has damaged democracy by limiting public exposure to a diverse and comprehensive range of information, perspectives, and analyses, even resulting in lies and misinformation in the news media.

- Introduction with thesis
 - Quote from Madison
 - Brief overview of issues
- History of American corporations
 - Early American Corporations
 - Corporations becoming legal "people"

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- Modern corporations
- Mergers of communication corporations
- Federal Communications Commission
 - Define the FCC
 - Commissioners' statements
- Effects of mergers
 - Harm to freedom of speech
 - Harm to diverse viewpoints
 - Harm to trustworthy news and information
- Examples of faulty news reporting
 - Mass media that promotes corporate agendas
 - Celebrity scandals instead of real news
- Conclusion
 - Reiteration of thesis and major arguments
 - Remind reader of opening quote

Formal Outline

The **formal outline** has a rigid structure; it is incredibly detailed, and it includes every single point that will make its way into the paper. This level of formality is often reserved for outlines that are part of an assignment; they are typically intended for an audience of some sort (even if it's only your professor, a tutor/proofreader, or partners in a class peer group) who need to get a strong sense of your paper before they even read it. Formal outlines are the ultimate writing blueprints because every single argument and fact from your paper, no matter how minor, shows up in it. They take time and dedication, but they definitely pay off in the end.

Below is the typical form for a formal outline. The following series of heading and subheadings, letters, and numerals is used at almost every college and university. The major headings are listed with Roman numerals. Here are the first twenty Roman numerals: I, II, III, IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, IX, X, XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, XVII, XVIII, XIX, XX.

- I. First Major Heading
 - A. First Sub-heading (level 1)
 - 1. First Sub-heading (level 2)
 - 2. Second Sub-heading (level 2)
 - a. First Sub-heading (level 3)
 - b. Second Sub-heading (level 3)
 - (1) First Sub-heading (level 4)
 - (2) Second Sub-heading (level 4)
 - (a) First Sub-heading (level 5)
 - (b) Second Sub-heading (level 5)
 - B. Second Sub-heading (level 1)
- II. Second Major Heading

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A variation on the formal outline is listed below. It is often used in the sciences, business, and even computer studies, and it's based on decimals instead of the Roman numeral structure shown previously.

1. First Major Heading
 - 1.1 First Sub-heading (level 1)
 - 1.1.1 First Sub-heading (level 2)
 - 1.1.1.1 First Sub-heading (level 3)
 - 1.1.1.1.2 Second Sub-heading (level 3)
 - 1.1.2 Second Sub-heading (level 2)
 - 1.1.2.1 First Sub-heading (level 3)
 - 1.2 Second Sub-heading (level 1)
 - 1.2.1 First Sub-heading (level 2)
 - 1.2.2 Second Sub-heading (level 2)
2. Second Major Heading

Topic Outlines and Full-Sentence Outlines

There are two options for formal outlines: the topic outline and the full-sentence outline. The topic outline lists all the major topics as you will include them in your paper, but as phrases instead of as complete sentences. The full-sentence outline, however, uses only complete sentences. You should aim for parallel structure in both types of outlines: don't phrase some sentences as assertions and others as questions, and don't switch back and forth between passive and active voice (active voice is preferable).

TOPIC OUTLINE

Although a **topic outline** shows the general structure of the paper, it is possible for gaps or flaws in the argument to go undetected because it is still rather skeletal and just a brief sketch of the final paper. The main points will be clear, however, and the outline will be a great help as you draft. Following is an example of a topic outline. (This is the outline that was used while the student wrote the sample MLA format research paper beginning on page 255.)

FORMAL TOPIC OUTLINE

Thesis: Today, modern corporations' power over the media has damaged democracy by limiting public exposure to a diverse and comprehensive range of information, perspectives and analyses, even resulting in lies and misinformation in the news media.

- I. Introduction
 - A. Quote from Madison—reader "hook"
 - B. Importance of communication on democracy
 - C. Thesis statement
- II. History of American corporations
 - A. Early American Corporations
 - B. Boston Tea Party
 - a. Quote from Lash
 - b. Critical discussion of Lash's quote

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- C. Corporations becoming legal "people"
- III. Modern Corporations
 - A. Recession of the 1980s
 - B. Branding
 - a. Quote Klein
 - b. Critical discussion of Klein's quote
 - C. Mergers of communication corporations
 - a. Quote Bagdikian
 - b. Critical discussion of Bagdikian's quotes
 - D. The threat to democracy
 - a. Quote McChesney
 - b. Critical discussion of McChesney's quote
- IV. Federal Communications Commission
 - A. Define the FCC
 - B. Commissioner Adalstein's statements
 - C. Commissioner Copps's statements
- V. Effects of mergers
- VI. Examples of faulty news reporting
 - A. *Project Censored*
 - B. Sunny Lewis article
 - 1. Quote Lewis article
 - 2. Critical discussion of Lewis's quote
 - C. Bovine Growth Hormone news story
 - 1. Background of news story
 - 2. Quote from *Project Censored*
 - 3. Critical discussion of quote
 - D. Celebrity Scandals
 - 1. Information from Halpern's *Fame Junkies*
 - 2. Critical discussion of Halpern's information
 - 3. Pew Research Center's study
 - 4. Real News replaced by celebrity scandals
 - a. For ratings
 - b. Low cost
- VII. Conclusion
 - A. Reiteration of thesis and major arguments
 - B. Remind reader of Madison's quote

FULL-SENTENCE OUTLINE

A **full-sentence** outline takes considerably more time to create than any of the other options, but preparing one is a major step toward completing your first draft. This type of outline is likely to reveal any problems in your argument. If you are not spending enough time developing one specific point, or if a flaw exists in the logical organization of your paper, you'll probably see the problem with this full-sentence outline. Similarly,

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with a little editing, many of the sentences you use in the outline can serve as topic sentences in your body paragraphs and transitional statements helping to wrap up major arguments. Cut and paste these sentences from outline to draft as you write.

Also, although the example that follows does not do so, many writers type or cut and paste all their quotes and paraphrases directly into their full-sentence outline. Again, this step will be time consuming up front, but when you're actually drafting your paper, a simple cut and paste will keep your writing flow going, in contrast to fishing for quotations and typing in someone else's words and then having to recover your writing flow. The following is a formal, full-sentence outline. (This is the outline that was used while the student wrote the sample MLA format research paper beginning on page 255.)

FULL-SENTENCE FORMAL OUTLINE

- I. Introduce the paper by discussing key notions of democracy as connected to free communications.
 - A. Madison proves that reliable information is a key component to a true self-governing democracy.
 - B. The growth and power of the modern corporation limits the ability of Americans to receive quality information.
 - C. Thesis Statement: Today, modern corporations' power over the media has damaged democracy by limiting public exposure to a diverse and comprehensive range of information, perspectives, and analyses, even resulting in lies and misinformation in the news media.
- II. The history of the American corporation provides a background for the discussion of media control.
 - A. Corporate corruption in the early colonies leads to the Boston Tea Party.
 - B. The spirit of the American Revolution kept corporations small for years.
 - C. The Santa Clara legal decision gives corporations the same rights as an individual person.
- III. The modern corporation grows in stature and power, eventually dominating the American airwaves.
 - A. The recession of the 1980s forces corporations to develop new models of business to keep operating.
 - B. Marketing and slick "branding" techniques give corporations more wealth and power than before.
 - C. Mergers of communication corporations create six major media conglomerates that own the bulk of all means of mass communication.
 - D. These media conglomerates care about profit more than anything else, and this harms several key components to American democracy.
- IV. The Federal Communications Commission's primary function is to manage and safeguard the American airwaves, ensuring that they are still owned and run by citizens and that free speech is strong and viable.
 - A. Chairman Adalstein thinks the airwaves should promote an "uninhibited marketplace of ideas," but they fail to.

- B. Commissioner Capps believes that though the public airwaves belong to the citizenry, they are entirely dominated by corporate interests bent on gaining advertising revenue, not serving the needs of the people.
- V. In spite of this corporate stranglehold on information, however, watchdog groups can still provide us with reliable information.
- VI. Several examples of faulty news reporting exist that will show the misinformation caused by corporate media ownership.
 - A. Every year, *Project Censored* creates a list of twenty-five significant news stories that have not properly been reported.
 1. Sunny Lewis's article shows mass pollution in American water that is never reported in the mainstream media.
 2. Fox News cuts a story on Bovine Growth Hormone being found in American milk.
 - B. Corporate news media is increasingly looking more like entertainment than news.
 1. The book *Fame Junkies* shows that celebrity news was more important than major stories like the genocide in Darfur or the war in Iraq.
 2. The Pew Research Center study shows that the people are tired of watching the same tired stories about celebrities in trouble, but it dominates the airwaves because these stories are cheap, easy, and help fill the need for 24 hours of information being broadcast on cable networks.
- VII. Conclude by discussing the truth in Madison's quote about American democracy merely being a farce or a tragedy.

Outlining is an inherently left-brain activity. It requires logic, sequential order, and a focus on the system you'll use to convince your audience of your thesis. This is perhaps the most important time in all of the writing process to separate left- and right-brain functions. If you attempt to skip this step and move straight to writing your paper, you're really hampering your own creativity. For most writers, every time their left brain gets warmed up, and they are thinking of their next logical step in the paper (figuring out what comes next), they have to switch gears and start getting creative. By the time their right brain is hot, and they're starting to lose themselves in the writing, they run out of things to say and have to toggle back to left-brain, sequential thought. However, you need to realize that your individual writing process will be unique. For example, you might discover that your organization is not working and decide to reorganize while you are in the middle of drafting your paper. There is nothing wrong with that, even though drafting is a right-brain activity and organizing is a left-brain one. Learn to become conscious of what works best for you.

Do yourself a favor and prepare your outline ahead of time in one shot. This will let your left brain do its thing and then allow your right brain to really cook when you have to get creative in the next step of the process. Even a brief sketch outline on the back of a paper napkin will help you keep your mental states separate. Finally, keep in mind that most word processing programs have an outline feature built in to them. However, you should experiment with this option in the software before starting your outlines.