

Welcome to the Purdue OWL

OWL at Purdue Logo This page is brought to you by the OWL at Purdue (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>). When printing this page, you must include the entire legal notice at bottom.

Contributors:Elyssa Tardiff, Allen Brizee.

Summary:

This resource describes why outlines are useful, what types of outlines exist, suggestions for developing effective outlines, and how outlines can be used as an invention strategy for writing.

Four Main Components for Effective Outlines

Ideally, you should follow these four suggestions to create an effective outline. The examples are taken from the Sample Outline handout.

Parallelism - How do I accomplish this?

Each heading and subheading should preserve parallel structure. If the first heading is a verb, the second heading should be a verb. Example:

1. Choose Desired Colleges
2. Prepare Application

("Choose" and "Prepare" are both verbs. The present tense of the verb is usually the preferred form for an outline)

Coordination - How do I accomplish this?

All the information contained in Heading 1 should have the same significance as the information contained in Heading 2. The same goes for the subheadings (which should be less significant than the headings). Example:

1. Visit and evaluate college campuses
2. Visit and evaluate college websites
 1. Note important statistics
 2. Look for interesting classes

(Campus and websites visits are equally significant. They are part of the main tasks you would need to do. Finding statistics and classes found on college websites are parts of the process involved in carrying out the main heading topics.)

Subordination - How do I accomplish this?

The information in the headings should be more general, while the information in the

subheadings should be more specific. Example:

1. Describe an influential person in your life
 1. Favorite high school teacher
 2. Grandparent

(A favorite teacher and grandparent are specific examples from the generalized category of influential people in your life.)

Division - How do I accomplish this?

Each heading should be divided into 2 or more parts. Example:

1. Compile resume
 1. List relevant coursework
 2. List work experience
 3. List volunteer experience

(The heading "Compile resume" is divided into 3 parts.)

Technically, there is no limit to the number of subdivisions for your headings; however, if you seem to have a lot, it may be useful to see if some of the parts can be combined.

Contributors:Elyssa Tardiff, Allen Brizee.

Summary:

This resource describes why outlines are useful, what types of outlines exist, suggestions for developing effective outlines, and how outlines can be used as an invention strategy for writing.

Why and How to Create a Useful Outline

Why create an outline? There are many reasons; but in general, it may be helpful to create an outline when you want to show the hierarchical relationship or logical ordering of information. For research papers, an outline may help you keep track of large amounts of information. For creative writing, an outline may help organize the various plot threads and help keep track of character traits. Many people find that organizing an oral report or presentation in outline form helps them speak more effectively in front of a crowd. Below are the primary reasons for creating an outline.

- Aids in the process of writing
- Helps you organize your ideas
- Presents your material in a logical form
- Shows the relationships among ideas in your writing
- Constructs an ordered overview of your writing
- Defines boundaries and groups

How do I create an outline?

- Determine the purpose of your paper.
- Determine the audience you are writing for.
- Develop the thesis of your paper.

Then:

- **Brainstorm:** List all the ideas that you want to include in your paper.
- **Organize:** Group related ideas together.
- **Order:** Arrange material in subsections from general to specific or from abstract to concrete.
- **Label:** Create main and sub headings.

Remember: creating an outline before writing your paper will make organizing your thoughts a lot easier. Whether you follow the suggested guidelines is up to you, but making any kind of outline (even just some jotting down some main ideas) will be beneficial to your writing process.

Contributors:Elyssa Tardiff, Allen Brizee.

Summary:

This resource describes why outlines are useful, what types of outlines exist, suggestions for developing effective outlines, and how outlines can be used as an invention strategy for writing.

Types of Outlines and Samples

Alphanumeric Outlines

This is the most common type of outline and usually instantly recognizable to most people. The formatting follows these characters, in this order:

- Roman Numerals
- Capitalized Letters
- Arabic Numerals
- Lowercase Letters

If the outline needs to subdivide beyond these divisions, use Arabic numerals inside parentheses and then lowercase letters inside parentheses. Select the "Sample Outlines" PDF in the Media Box above to download the sample of this outline.

The sample PDF in the Media Box above is an example of an outline that a student might create before writing an essay. In order to organize her thoughts and make sure that she has not forgotten any key points that she wants to address, she creates the outline as a framework for her essay.

What is the assignment?

Your instructor asks the class to write an expository (explanatory) essay on the typical steps a high school student would follow in order to apply to college.

What is the purpose of this essay?

To explain the process for applying to college

Who is the intended audience for this essay?

High school students intending to apply to college and their parents

What is the essay's thesis statement?

When applying to college, a student follows a certain process which includes choosing the right schools and preparing the application materials.

Full Sentence Outlines

The full sentence outline format is essentially the same as the Alphanumeric outline. The main difference (as the title suggests) is that full sentences are required at each level of the outline. This outline is most often used when preparing a traditional essay. Select the "Sample Outlines" PDF in the Media Box above to download the sample of this outline.

Decimal Outlines

The decimal outline is similar in format to the alphanumeric outline. The added benefit is a system of decimal notation that clearly shows how every level of the outline relates to the larger whole. Select the "Sample Outlines" PDF in the Media Box above to download the sample of this outline.

Copyright ©1995-2010 by [The Writing Lab](#) & [The OWL at Purdue](#) and [Purdue University](#). All rights reserved. This material may not be published, reproduced, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed without permission. Use of this site constitutes acceptance of [our terms and conditions of fair use](#). Please [report any technical problems](#) you encounter.