

Constructing an Outline

An outline is a visual, organized conception of how the parts of an essay or a research paper will fit together. An outline presents ideas and material in a logical format that shows relationships and groupings. Outlines can be informal, personalized notes made by the writer to him/herself. However, instructors will often require outlines with specific structuring guidelines. Suggested steps in making a formal outline: 1) decide the purpose, thesis, and audience of the paper; 2) list all ideas and information to be included—do not worry about structure at this stage—brainstorm freely; 3) group points that are related to one another; 4) for each group, arrange the ideas and information from general topics to specific details or from abstract concepts to concrete theories and applications; and 5) use Roman numerals, letters, or decimals to indicate levels of the material's importance and indent each line to show where a new level of importance begins.

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|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| I. First main topic | 1.0 First main topic |
| A. First subordinate idea | 1.1 First subordinate idea |
| 1. First supporting idea | 1.1.1 First supporting idea |
| a. First supporting detail | 1.1.1.1 First supporting detail |

NOTE: Roman numerals in conjunction with letters comprise the most common outline format. Outline headings may follow either topic or sentence structure. Topic outlines use words or phrases and no punctuation. Sentence outlines use complete sentences and proper punctuation. Generally, an outline follows topic or sentence structure, but it cannot follow both styles. Below is a sample topic outline.

Thesis: The Internet is making it easier for people to communicate with one another.

- I. Websites
 - A. Website creators
 - 1. Businesses
 - 2. Non-businesses
 - a. Other organizations
 - b. Individuals and personal concerns
 - B. Website readers
- II. E-mail
 - A. Chats with friends
 - B. Chats with strangers
 - 1. Breakdown of barriers
 - a. Between nations
 - b. Between subcultures
 - 2. Formation of new commonalities

Reference: The St. Martin's Handbook: Annotated Instructor's Edition, 3rd ed. New York: St. Martin's, 1995. ;
"Developing an Outline," Purdue University On-line Writing Lab. Lunsford, Andrea, Robert Connors, and Cheryl Glenn.