

Basic Outlining

An outline presents a picture of the main ideas and the subsidiary ideas of any subject. Some typical uses of outlining are: a class reading assignment, an essay, a term paper, a book review or a speech. For any of these, an outline will show a basic overview and important details.

Some professors will require an outline in sentence form, or require the main points to be in chronological order, or have other specific requirements. A student's first responsibility, of course, is to follow the requirements of the particular assignment. What follows illustrates only the basics of outlining. This is merely a quick reminder because students often ask about outlining, and the information is not always easy to find in various reference books.

USING PROPER OUTLINE FORM:

Below is a synopsis of the outline form. The main ideas take roman numerals. Sub-points under each main idea take capital letters and are indented. Sub-points under the capital letters, if any, take Arabic numbers and are further indented.

- I. FIRST MAIN IDEA
 - A. Subheading—supports first main idea
 - 1. Detail—supports subheading A
 - 2. Detail—supports subheading A
 - a) Subdetail—supports Detail 2
 - b) Subdetail—supports Detail 2
 - B. Subheading—supports first main idea
- II. SECOND MAIN IDEA
 - A. Subheading—supports second main idea
 - B. Subheading—supports second main idea
 - 1. Detail—supports subheading B
 - 2. Detail—supports subheading B
 - C. Subheading—supports second main idea
- III. THIRD MAIN IDEA

It is up to the writer to decide on how many main ideas and supporting ideas adequately describe the subject. However, if there is a I in the outline, there has to be a II; if there is an A, there has to be a B; if there is a 1, there has to be a 2, and so forth.

Observe the following matters of form:

- Use Roman numerals for main ideas
- Use Capital letters for subheadings
- Use Arabic numbers for supporting details
- Place a period after the numerals and letters that introduce the points in the outline
- Begin every point in the outline with a capital letter
- Do NOT place periods after any of the points in the outline
- Indent each level of the outline
- If there is an A, there must also be a B; if there is a 1, there must also be a 2
- State each point as a word or a phrase, but not as a complete sentence

State the points of each division in parallel form. Use the same kind of word or phrase within each division. Do not use complete sentences.

FISH (example)

- | | Not parallel | | Parallel |
|-----|-----------------------------|-----|-----------------|
| I. | Freshwater fish | I. | Freshwater fish |
| II. | Some fish live in saltwater | II. | Saltwater fish |

Example of a finished topical outline:

LIFE SCIENCE CATEGORIES

- I. Plants
- II. Animals
 - A. Invertebrates
 - 1. Insects
 - 2. Arachnids
 - 3. Shellfish
 - B. Vertebrates
 - 1. Fish
 - 2. Amphibians
 - 3. Reptiles
 - 4. Birds
 - 5. Mammals
 - a) Marine mammals
 - b) Land mammals

SELECTING A SUBJECT AND LISTING IDEAS:

1. **Select a subject.** Make sure it is not too broad to be adequately treated within your assignment. The subject “Diseases” is too broad for a brief composition, but the subject “Nutrition in Disease Prevention” might be limited enough. The subject “Applied Science” is too broad even for an extensive research paper, but “Refining and Fashioning Metals” is likely manageable.
2. **Write out your purpose.** Stating your purpose will give your paper direction and help you avoid the inclusion of unrelated material. For the subject “Nutrition in Disease Prevention” your purpose might read as follows: “The purpose of this composition is to show how nutrition can contribute to the prevention of certain diseases.” For the subject “Refining and Fashioning Metals” here is an example: “The purpose of this paper is to explain how metals are refined and then fashioned into products.”
3. **Make a list of ideas that support your subject.** List the ideas as they occur to you. Don’t worry about the order.
4. **Cross out any unnecessary or unrelated ideas.** Compare each idea in your list with your statement of purpose. Cross any ideas that do not support it off your list.
5. **Determine the main headings.** Sometimes the main headings come from the list you made. More often you will probably make up your own headings. Refer to your statement of purpose to help you create those headings.
6. **Group the remaining ideas under the main headings.**
7. **Decide which points will be subheadings and which points will be supporting details.** You may have to make up some of the subheadings.
8. **Arrange the main points and subpoints in some clear order.**
9. **State the points of each division in parallel grammatical form.** Check all the points within each division to see if they are stated the same way.
10. **Write the final copy of your outline.**

Much of this material is adapted from the A Beka *Grammar & Composition* series.