

Creating an Outline

Starting with Direction



Prewriting and organizing are two essential parts of the writing process, yet they're often overlooked. Students frequently say things like, "My instructor didn't ask for an outline," or, "Oh, I always do better when I just free-write." It can be easy to think that organizing a paper beforehand is a waste of time or extra work, but in fact, taking the time to pre-organize your thoughts into an essay will *save* you time and effort when you write it.

Planning Around Main Points

The key to creating an outline is knowing which points you want your paper to cover. Your instructor will likely have specific guidelines for how the outline should be formatted (assuming your instructor requires you to turn in your outline), but the basics of creating an outline won't vary much: you'll have a central topic or premise, supported by a series of main points (which can, in turn, be supported by sub-points and supporting details). Your outline can be a topic outline *or* a sentence outline.

Rule of Three

If your paper follows the typical "five paragraph" form, you'll usually have three main points. Even for longer papers like research papers, the three-point layout can serve well. Exactly what you use as your main points depends greatly on your topic. Most topics, from the most straightforward narrative to the most complex research paper, can be distilled into three points. This is not always the case, but this "rule of three" is generally a good guideline to follow when considering the structure and outline of your paper.

It can be evident in a wide variety of topics. If you start with something simple like a personal narrative (a frequent first assignment in a composition class), you're going to tell the story in chronological order. If, for example, you're writing a narrative about your wedding day, your three main points of a *topic outline* could be:

- 1) Preparations for the wedding
- 2) The wedding ceremony
- 3) The reception dinner

That's a simple set of main points that, paired with an introduction and a conclusion, can make a full narrative. However, the same "rule of three" can also be applied to more complex topics. For instance, if you're writing an argumentative essay supporting stronger gun regulation, your three main points would be your three reasons supporting *why* you have taken that stance, usually ordered from least important to most important, like in this *sentence outline*:

- 1) The Second Amendment doesn't guarantee freedom from gun liability
- 2) The Second Amendment was written before the advent of modern firearms
- 3) The Second Amendment specifies that arms should be "well regulated"

Defining an Outline

Once you have your three main points, you can begin thinking of how you want to structure your paper. Some instructors have specific formats they want for your outline, with Roman numerals, capital letters, etc., but the basic layout of an outline is just in levels: main points, supporting points, detail points, and so forth.

The important thing to remember is that the whole purpose of doing an outline is to keep your thoughts structured and organized as you're writing the paper, which will save you time and effort. When you create an outline, the most important thing to remember is that all of your points should be parallel. That is, they should all be structured the same way; if you use a simple noun as your first main point, you should do the same for your other main points. The other "cardinal rule" of an outline is that no point should have only one sub-point. Be detailed enough to know what is relevant to your paper, but not too detailed. After all, the outline is essentially your entire paper in simplified form. If you're writing a research paper on AIDS, for example, your outline might look like this:

- I. Introduction
 - A. Brief overview of AIDS
 - B. Importance of knowing about AIDS
- II. Causes and risk factors
 - A. Causes
 1. Human immunodeficiency virus
 2. Compromised immune system
 - B. Risk factors
 1. Unprotected sex
 2. Drug use with unsterile needles
- III. Symptoms and effects
 - A. Symptoms
 1. Physical symptoms
 2. Neurological symptoms
 - B. Prognosis
 1. Life expectancy
 2. Death by co-infection
- IV. Treatment options
 - A. Antiviral therapy
 1. Antiretroviral medication
 2. Importance of adherence
 - B. Diet
 1. Balanced diet
 2. Supplemental selenium
- V. Conclusion
 - A. Importance of early treatment
 - B. Importance of safe sex, prevention

In the example outline, each Roman numeral represents a segment of your paper. If this outline represents a research paper, which could be five pages or more, you can break each part of the outline down even further; each letter represents one or two paragraphs, while each lowercase numeral represents a key detail in those paragraphs (which would presumably be supported by researched information from an outside source).

Note that the outline contains no complete sentences. It's a topic outline - simply a quick, noun-based overview of the paper. This is a simple, well-flowing model that can be useful in almost any sort of academic writing. In fact, next time you have to read a textbook, look closely at the layout of the chapter you read; chances are that it can be neatly organized into outline form based on its sections, headings, and subheadings.

Even if your instructor does not require an outline, you should create an outline for every paper. You don't need to follow precise formatting rules if you're not submitting your outline to an instructor, but *doing* an outline will save you considerable frustration and prevent writer's block.

Further Reading

- Why and How to Create a Useful Outline (Purdue OWL)
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/544/02>
- How to Make an Outline (University of Washington)
<https://www.psych.wu.edu/writingcenter/writingguides/pdf/outline.pdf>