

How to Write an Outline

What is it?

An outline is a general plan of the material that is to be presented in a speech or a paper. The outline shows the order of the various topics, the relative importance of each, and the relationship between the various parts.

Order in an Outline

There are many ways to arrange the different parts of a subject. Sometimes, a chronological arrangement works well. At other times, a spatial arrangement is best suited to the material. The most common order in outlines is to go from the general to the specific. This means you begin with a general idea and then support it with specific examples.

Thesis Statement

All outlines should begin with a thesis statement. This thesis sentence presents the central idea of the paper. It must always be a complete, grammatical sentence, specific and brief, which expresses the point of view you are taking towards the subject.

Types of Outlines

The two main types of outlines are the topic outline and the sentence outline. In the topic outline, the headings are given in single words or brief phrases. In the sentence outline, all the headings are expressed in complete sentences.

Rules for Outlining

1. Subdivide topics by a system of numbers and letters, followed by a period.

Example:

I.

A.

B.

1.

2.

a.

b.

II.

A.

B.

2. Each heading and subheading must have at least two parts.

3. Headings for parts of the paper of speech such as, Introduction and Conclusion, should not be used.

4. Be consistent. Do not mix up the two types of outlines. Use either whole sentences or brief phrases, but not both.

Examples

Topic Outline

Choices in College and After

Thesis: The decisions I have to make in choosing college courses, depend on larger questions I am beginning to ask myself about my life's work.

- I. Two decisions described
 - A. Art history or chemistry
 - 1. Professional considerations
 - 2. Personal considerations
 - B. A third year of French?
 - 1. Practical advantages of knowing a foreign language
 - 2. Intellectual advantages
 - 3. The issue of necessity
- II. Definition of the problem
 - A. Decisions about occupation
 - B. Decisions about a kind of life to lead
- III. Temporary resolution of the problem
 - A. To hold open a professional possibility: chemistry
 - B. To take advantage of cultural gains already made: French

Sentence Outline

Choices in College and After

Thesis: The decisions I have to make in choosing college courses, depend on larger questions I am beginning to ask myself about my life's work.

- I. I have two decisions to make with respect to choosing college courses in the immediate future.
 - A. One is whether to elect a course in art history or in chemistry.
 - 1. One time in my life, I planned to be a chemical engineer professionally.
 - 2. On the other hand, I enjoy art and plan to travel and see more of it.
 - B. The second decision is whether to continue a third year of French beyond the basic college requirement.
 - 1. French might be useful both in engineering and travel.
 - 2. Furthermore, I am eager to read good books which are written in French.
 - 3. How necessary are these considerations in the light of other courses I might take instead?
- II. My problem can be put in the form of a dilemma involving larger questions about my whole future.
 - A. On the one hand I want to hold a highly-trained position in a lucrative profession.
 - B. On the other hand I want to lead a certain kind of life, with capacities for values not connected with the making of money.
- III. I will have to make a decision balancing the conflicting needs I have described.
 - A. I will hold open the professional possibilities by electing chemistry.
 - B. I will improve and solidify what cultural proficiency in another language I have already gained, by electing French.