



## Developing Outlining Skills

**What is an outline?** An outline is a plan on how to present specific material or summarizes material from research. It is typically used for organizing material for a speech, course or research paper but occasionally professors will request students to outline chapter or textbook material as an assignment. An outline shows the order of the topics, their importance and relationship to each other. It is a way to break down material into parts. This information is directed toward a student preparing for a composition paper or speech.

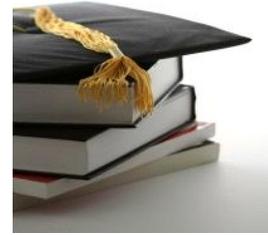
**What kind of outlines are there?** There are two main types of outlines; one is the topic outline where your heading and subparts are generally written as a phrase or in a word or two. The second type of outline is a sentence outline where every entry is written as a complete sentence. I generally accept the topic outline, but the thesis statement ( I.) should be a complete sentence.

**How do I know how to make an outline?** When writing an outline most students use alternating series of numbers and letters to indicate main topics, supporting information. How you arrange the information may depend on your topic and the assignment. Sometimes using a chronological order works well if you are listing reasons for something or giving a sequential account of something. Other times you may be summarizing how different things are related to a topic and showing that relationship may work better. Most students use a more common way of outlining that allows the writer to go from general information to specific details about the topic.

**What is a thesis statement and where does it belong in the outline?** The thesis statement is the first section of the outline. It is an introduction to what your material or presentation is about and sets the stage for the listener or reader. The thesis statement is the central idea of the paper and it is recommended that be written as a complete sentence so you don't have to come back to eat and keep rewriting it. The thesis statement should indicate the point of view or argument that you are making regarding the topic.

Generally speaking, if you have a main topic - I. for example, then there must be a II. If you have a subheading of capital A, then you must have a subheading of a capital B. If you have numbers below each subheading then you must have at least two subheadings for each area. Depending on your assignment and the length of your chapter / paper will determine how many main points and subheadings you will need. Each heading and subheading must have at least two parts to it. However, when outlining chapters, some leeway is given.

Although college professors may have their own unique way of doing outlines... I suggest you start with the following steps. Once you have a clear understanding of what I expect in your work, you may develop your own technique of achieving the desire end product. The outline is a grade in itself, but the skill of outlining transcends just the grade and has a life-long positive benefit in all professions.



## **GET STARTED!**

### **Step 1**

Skim the textbook chapter, **looking at the headings and any bold, colored or italic words.** Having a basic idea of the chapter content and keywords will help you follow the structure of the chapter better and prepare you for outlining. Don't forget the picture, graphs, illustrations, etc... They must be noted in the outline.

### **Step 2**

Read the chapter. Don't start writing your outline yet, but feel free to write down any particularly interesting points or page numbers as you go.

### **Step 3**

Begin your outline. Many textbook chapters have introductory paragraphs that give a good outline for the chapter. For example, in a history textbook, a chapter introduction may say it will discuss the lead up to the Vietnam War, the war itself and the aftermath. For the Vietnam War chapter, you might choose three main headings: Before the War, During the War and After the War.

### **Step 4**

Adhere to the outline format. (See example at the end of this document.) Outlines typically have several different levels; one of the most common formats has heading titles preceded by I, II, III. Subheadings begin with capital letter headings, followed by Arabic numeral headings (1, 2, 3), followed by lowercase Roman numeral headings (i, ii, iii). Label each level of heading and content with both a number or letter and a title, key word, or sentence, and indent each successive level of headings more than the previous level. Use the structure your instructor prefers, if given.

### **Step 5**

Search for the main ideas and subjects as you re-read the chapter and write your outline. Under each main heading, add subheadings that elaborate on the subject, giving additional facts and details. For the Vietnam War, you might have subheadings with key facts about the effects of the American draft on American society and significant events such as the Tet Offensive. Ideas that are part of a main idea should be indented and labeled as a subheading of that idea.

### **Step 6**

Skim the chapter once more when you have finished re-reading the chapter and constructing your outline to check that you have not missed any important information.



**What does an outline look like?** An outline can be as extensive and detailed as the material you are outlining requires, but note the following basic format of an **Alphanumeric Topic Outline**:

### BASIC OUTLINE FORMAT

- I.**
  - A.**
    - 1.
    - 2.
      - a.
      - b.
  - B.**
    - 1.
    - 2.
      - a.
      - b.
- II.**
  - A.**
    - 1.
    - 2.
      - a.
      - b.
  - B.**
    - 1.
    - 2.
      - a.
      - b.

