



Using Outlines

This guide online: go.iu.edu/3LX8

1. About

Many writers use outlines to help them think through the various stages of the writing process. An outline is a kind of graphic scheme of the organization of your paper. It indicates the main arguments for your thesis as well as the subtopics under each main point. Outlines range from the informal, using indenting and graphics (such as –, *, •), to the formal, which often uses Roman numerals and letters. Regardless of the degree of formality, however, the function of most outlines is to help you consider the most effective way to say what you want to say.

Outlines usually grow out of working plans for papers. For shorter, less complex papers, a few informal notes jotted down may be enough. But longer papers are too big to organize mentally; you generally need a written plan to help you organize the various parts of the paper. Preparing an outline will enable you to think over your notes, consider them from several perspectives, and devise an organizational plan appropriate to your topic, audience and assignment. An outline that accompanies the final draft of a paper can also function as a table of contents for the reader.

When you think of outlines, you probably think of an organizational plan to help you draft a paper, but you can outline at any stage of the writing process. At each stage, the outline serves a different function and helps you answer different writing questions.

2. Research Outlines

While you are researching a topic, you can make a tentative outline—a plan for your paper based on what you are learning from your research. This kind of outline helps you answer two questions: What do I already know? What do I need to research more? Here is an example of a tentative outline a student used to begin doing research for an essay comparing three different political theories: neo-Marxism, pluralism and elitism. The writer already knew about two of the theories, but needed more information about the third.

Neo-Marxism

- *power to minority*
- *emphasizes economics*

Pluralism

- *power to interest groups*
- *shifting coalitions of groups*

Elitism

- *definition*
- *description*

Analysis: United States

- *neo-Marxist*
- *pluralist*
- *elitist*

3. Working Outlines

During pre-writing, you can make a working outline—an outline that guides you in your drafting. It helps you answer the question: How am I going to present my information given my thesis, my assignment and my audience?

The student who wrote the tentative outline above also wrote the one below before beginning her essay. She wanted to describe the three political theories and then compare them by using each to analyze the government of a particular country, arguing that neo-Marxism is the most useful theory. Her working outline isn't very formal, but it fulfills the functions of a good outline:

- It supports the thesis.
- It establishes the order and relationship of the main points.
- It clarifies the relationship of the major and minor points.

Introduction

- *theories are simpler than real life*
- *theories are tools*

Three Political Theories

1. *Neo-Marxism*

- *power to minority*
- *importance of economic control*

2. *Pluralism*

- *power to interest groups*
- *interest groups form coalitions*

3. *Elitism*

- *power to elite*
- *how elite is defined*

Compare analysis of United States

- Neo-Marxist
- Pluralist
- Elitist

Your job as a writer is to think through the relationships between your ideas. For example, is one idea similar to or different from another? Is one a cause of another? An effect? An example? Is one idea the solution to another? Do two points represent different categories of a larger idea? In other words, do your ideas fall into one of the conventional approaches to thinking about an issue:

cause-effect, problem-solution, comparison-contrast, definition, classification? You can use these standard approaches to help you think through your ideas and come up with a logical plan. This plan then becomes your outline.

4. Draft Outlines

After you have written a first draft of your paper, you can make a draft or descriptive outline--an outline that is based on your draft. It describes each paragraph in your draft so that you can critique your organization. It helps you answer these questions: Does my draft flow logically from point to point? Have I discussed similar ideas in the same section or do I jump around?

This is a draft outline the student mentioned above made after writing the first draft of her paper. She summarized the draft, paragraph by paragraph, and then took a look at what the outline revealed.

1. *General introduction to political theories*
2. *Thesis: neo-Marxism most useful*
3. *Description of neo-Marxism*
4. *Description of pluralism*
5. *Coalitions of interest groups*
6. *Description of elitism*
7. *Pluralist analysis of U.S.*
8. *Neo-Marxist analysis of U.S.*
9. *Strengths of neo-Marxist analysis*
10. *Weaknesses of neo-Marxism*
11. *Weaknesses of elitism*
12. *Conclusion*

She noticed that the descriptions of neo-Marxism and elitism were each in a single paragraph, but the description of pluralism took two paragraphs. She decided to be consistent by combining 3 and 4. She also noticed that the second half of the paper seemed to jump around from theory to theory, presenting each theory's analysis and then each theory's weaknesses. She decided to put the pluralist analysis of the U.S. and the weaknesses of the analysis together in 6, the elitist analysis and its weaknesses into a paragraph together, and then devote two paragraphs to the neo-Marxist analysis and its strengths and weaknesses.

5. Questions to Ask Yourself When Revising Your Paper

Finally, you may be required to write a formal outline—an outline that serves as a guide to your paper for your reader. If you haven't already been making formal outlines, this outline will be a formal version of your previous notes; it lays out your main points and subpoints for your reader. Generally, this kind of outline uses conventions of formal outlining: Roman numerals, letters and indentations. Sometimes this type of outline can be produced after you have written your essay.

Formal outlines can be written in two ways. In topic outlines, the ideas are expressed in parallel phrases (that is, in the same grammatical form--noun phrases, verb phrases, etc.). Topic outlines have the advantage of being brief. In sentence outlines, on the other hand, the ideas are expressed in complete, though not necessarily parallel, sentences. Sentence outlines give the reader a clearer idea of what you will argue than topic outlines.

Regardless of the kind of formal outline you choose, convention states that you begin with a statement of your thesis and indicate increasing levels of support in this order: I., A., 1., a., (1), (a). In scientific papers, however, a decimal system is also commonly used. A topic outline follows.

Thesis: Among the pluralist, elitist and neo-Marxist political theories, neo-Marxism provides the most powerful analysis of the current political scene.

1. *Functions of political theories*
 - A. *Tools to help understand governments*
 1. *Categorization*
 2. *Comparison*
 - B. *Limitation: Over-simplification*
2. *Three political theories*
 - A. *Neo-Marxism*
 - *Definition*
 - *Description*
 - B. *Pluralism*
 - *Definition*
 - *Description*
 - C. *Elitism*
 - *Definition*
 - *Description*
3. *Comparative analysis of U.S. government*
 - A. *Pluralism*
 - *Analysis*
 - *Weaknesses*
 - B. *Elitism*
 - *Analysis*
 - *Weaknesses*
 - C. *Neo-Marxism*
 - *Analysis*
 - *Critique*
 - a. *Strengths*
 - b. *Weaknesses*
4. *Conclusion*

Notice that in a formal outline, whenever a point is subdivided, there are at least two subpoints. Logic and convention state that when you divide a point, you can divide it into no fewer than two subpoints. Remember, depending on how your research or writing is going, you may need to make use of any or all of the outlines described in this pamphlet.

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