

# Writing Center

## Outlining Guidelines

A formal outline is a useful tool for planning essays and for taking notes about written material. Students should not hesitate to use informal outlines—which have no prescribed lettering and numbering system—in the preliminary stages of planning papers. However, an outline to be submitted for a class should follow one of the standard forms of formal writing.

### I. Usefulness

- A. Helps organize information and ideas
- B. Provides coherence for final papers
- C. Reveals imbalances gaps in logic, and inadequate development
- D. Helps writer estimate scope of final paper
- E. Serves as a stimulus to thought and ideas
- F. Aids in taking notes about reading materials
- G. Helps ensure that essay test answers are logical and complete

### II. Types (do not mix—each outline should be consistently one type)

- A. Topic outline (the most commonly used for papers of all lengths)
  - 1. Lists all points as single words or as phrases
  - 2. Requires parallel structure for phrases within subdivisions
- B. Sentence outline
  - 1. Uses complete sentences instead of phrases
  - 2. May use phrase or sentence heading at Roman numeral divisions
  - 3. Increases readability
- C. Paragraph outline (normally used for taking notes or for planning long papers)
  - 1. May use phrases or sentence heading at Roman numeral divisions
  - 2. Summarizes each major point in a few sentences

### III. Ways to use outlines

- A. For taking notes
  - 1. Examining chapter titles, which reveal general organization
  - 2. Finding boldface or italic headings and subheadings that reveal elements of varied importance
  - 3. Looking for boldface or italic words that highlight important ideas
  - 4. Finding main ideas at the beginning and end of each paragraph, section, scene, screen, frame, chapter, or other division
  - 5. Observing shifts in lighting, mood, or tone
- B. For planning a paper
  - 1. Jotting down ideas in whatever they come to mind
  - 2. Reading over the initial list and finding elements that seem to belong together
  - 3. Within each group, identifying items in relationship to each other to create major headings and subdivisions

- 4. Revising during the process of converting the list to a formal outline
- 5. Changing and rearranging elements as necessary

IV. Conventions of format

- A. Writing items of equal importance in parallel form within subdivision
- B. Making every subdivision a logical part of the heading under which it appears
- C. Avoiding single-item subdivisions (if there is only one subpoint, incorporate it into the heading above it)
- D. Making each item as specific as possible
- E. Avoiding long series of items under any subdivision; instead, identifying or creating new subdivisions
- F. Omitting headings labeled “Introduction” or “Conclusion” (however, content-based headings should be used to show the major information contained in introductions or conclusions)
- G. Using the numbering and lettering system appropriate for the context; standard lettering and numbering for most papers in the humanities, social sciences, and business; decimal system for technical and scientific work
  - 1. Ordering items from most general or most important to least general or least important (or vice versa)
  - 2. Indenting parallel headings the same distance from the left margin
  - 3. Beginning every entry with a capital letter
  - 4. Ending entries with a period only in sentence or paragraph outlines

**Standard Outlining Format for Humanities, Social Sciences, and Business Writing**

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

**Standard Outline Format for Technical and Scientific Writing**

- 1.
  - 1.1
  - 1.2
- 2.
  - 2.1

- 2.2
  - 2.2.1
  - 2.2.2
    - 2.2.2.1
    - 2.2.2.2
- 3.

### **Sample Outlining**

#### Foreshadowing in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado"

Thesis: By presenting clues, Poe prepares readers for the grotesque outcome of the story.

- I. Fortunato's costume
  - A. Fool's outfit
  - B. Bells
- II. Montresor's family background
  - A. Family crest
  - B. Family motto
- III. "Mason" scene
  - A. The gesticulation
    - 1. Fortunato's response
    - 2. Montresor's response
  - B. The trowel
- IV The catacombs
  - A. Family crypt
  - B. Scattered bones