George Mason University Writing Center

writingcenter.gmu.edu
wcenter@gmu.edu
703.993.1200

Outlining

An outline is a map of your essay. It shows what information each section or paragraph will contain, and in what order. Most outlines use numbers and/or bullet points to arrange information and convey points.

Why create an outline?

Outlining is a tool we use in the writing process to help organize our ideas, visualize our paper's potential structure, and to further flesh out and develop points. It allows the writer to understand how he or she will connect information to support the thesis statement and the claims of the paper. An outline provides the writer with a space to consider ideas easily without needing to write complete paragraphs or sentences.

Creating your outline:

Before beginning an outline, it is useful to have a clear thesis statement or clear purpose or argument, as everything else in the outline is going to work to support the thesis. Note: the outline might help inform the thesis, and therefore your thesis might change or develop within the outlining process.

Organize your outline in whatever format fits into the structure needed for the type of paper you are writing. One common outline format uses Roman numerals, letters, and numbers. Other outlines can use bullet points or other symbols. You can use whatever organizational patterns work best for you and your paper, as long as you understand your own organizational tools. Outlines can be written using complete sentences or fragments or a mix of the two.

Remember! After creating your outline, you may decide to reorganize your ideas by putting them in a different order. Furthermore, as you are writing you might make some discoveries and can, of course, always adjust or deviate from the outline as needed.

Sample Outlines:

As you can see in the outline below, the writer chose to separate the outline by topics, but could have utilized a different structure, organizing the outline by separate paragraphs, indicating what each paragraph will do or say.

Example 1:

    I.   Introduction

          A. Background information
          B. Thesis

    II.   Reason 1

          A. Use quotes from x
          B. Use evidence from y

    III.   Reason 2

          A. Counterargument
             1. They might say…
             2. But…

    IV.   Conclusion

    A. Connect back to thesis
    B. Answer the "so what" or "what now" question
    C. End on a memorable note

Note : The sample outline above illustrates the structure of an outline, but it is quite vague. Your outline should be as specific as possible.

Proposal Outline:

I. Summary/ Synopsis of proposed project
- Rationale
- Specific aims and objectives
- Experimental approaches to be used
- The potential significance

II. Specific Aims
- X
- Y
- Z

III. Background and Significance
- Background
- Significance to current project
- Significance to long-term research objectives
- Critical evaluations of existing knowledge
- Forward progress

IV. Preliminary Data
- Description of prelim data to justify the rationale
- Demonstrate feasibility of the project

V. Experimental Design and Methods
- Details of design and procedures
- Protocols
- Means of data analysis and interpretation
- New methodology and its advantages
- Potential technical difficulties or limitations/ alternative approaches

VI. References
- Citations

Note: Outlines can look quite different. You might use Roman numerals to indicate the main point or function of that section, and then letters to indicate separate sub-points, and then even bullet points or numbers to indicate specific information, like using certain quotes, sources, evidence, or examples.

Adapted From:

Los Angeles Valley College Writing Center, "How to Make an Outline" 2/2/15

Northwestern University Collaborative Learning and Integrated Mentoring in the Biosciences, "A Basic Proposal Outline"

San Jose State University Writing Center, "Essay Planning: Outlining with a Purpose" Spring 2014

Last updated 7/13/2016