

How to Make an Outline

What is an Outline?

An outline is a formal system used to think about and organize your paper. For example, you can use it to see whether your ideas connect to each other, what order of ideas works best, or whether you have sufficient evidence to support each of your points. Outlines can be useful for any paper to help you see the overall picture.

There are two kinds of outlines: the topic outline and the sentence outline.

- The topic outline consists of short phrases. It is particularly useful when you are dealing with a number of different issues that could be arranged in a variety of ways in your paper.
- The sentence outline is done in full sentences. It is normally used when your paper focuses on complex details. The sentence outline is especially useful for this kind of paper because sentences themselves have many of the details in them. A sentence outline also allows you to include those details in the sentences instead of having to create an outline of many short phrases that goes on page after page.

Both topic and sentence outlines follow rigid formats, using Roman and Arabic numerals along with capital and small letters of the alphabet. This helps both you and anyone who reads your outline to follow your organization easily. This is the kind of outline most commonly used for classroom papers and speeches (see the example at the end of this paper). There is no rule for which type of outline is best. Choose the one that you think works best for your paper.

Make the Outline

1. **Identify the topic.** The topic of your paper is important. Try to sum up the point of your paper in one sentence or phrase. This will help your paper stay focused on the main point.
2. **Identify the main categories.** What main points will you cover? The introduction usually introduces all of your main points, then the rest of paper can be spent developing those points.
3. **Create the first category.** What is the first point you want to cover? If the paper centers around a complicated term, a definition is often a good place to start. For a paper about a particular theory, giving the general background on the theory can be a good place to begin.
4. **Create subcategories.** After you have the main point, create points under it that provide support for the main point. The number of categories that you use depends on the amount of information that you are going to cover; there is no right or wrong number to use.

By convention, each category consists of a minimum of two entries. If your first category is Roman numeral I, your outline must also have a category labeled roman numeral II; if you have a capital letter A under category I, you must also have a capital letter B. Whether you then go on to have capital letters C, D, E, etc., is up to you, depending on the amount of material you are going to cover.

You are required to have only two of each numbered or lettered category.

The completed outline could look like this:

Television and Children's Violence

I. Introduction

- A. Does television cause violence?
 - 1. Brief mention of previous areas of research
 - 2. Identify causation dilemma
- B. Present studies on both sides
 - 1. Some studies are "for"
 - 2. Some studies are "against"
- C. After weighing evidence it appears that TV does not cause violence

II. Research "For"

- A. First study "for"
 - 1. Method
 - 2. Results
 - 3. Analysis of their conclusions
 - a. insufficient sample size
 - b. but representative sample
- B. Second study "for"
 - 1. Method
 - 2. Results
 - 3. Analysis of their conclusions
 - a. faulty instructions
 - b. poor control group

III. Research "Against"

- A. Study "against"

1. Method
 2. Results
 3. Analysis of their conclusions
 - a. Perfect controls
 - b. No unwarranted generalizations
- B. Second study "against"
1. Method
 2. Results
 3. Analysis of their conclusions
 - a. Large sample size
 - b. Real world setting
 - c. But typical problems with external validity

IV. Conclusion

- A. Studies "for" all have poor methodology
- B. Studies "against" all have good methodology
- C. Research doesn't support that TV causes violence
- D. More research needed

Keep Your Outline Flexible

Although the format of an outline is rigid, it shouldn't make you inflexible about how to write your paper. Often when you start writing, especially about a subject that you don't know well, the paper takes new directions. If your paper changes direction, or you add new sections, then feel free to change the outline--just as you would make corrections on a crude map as you become more familiar with the terrain you are exploring. Major reorganizations are not uncommon; your outline will help you stay organized and focused.

However, when your paper diverges from your outline, it can also mean that you have lost your focus, and hence the structure of your paper. How do you know whether to change the paper to fit the outline or change the outline to fit the paper? A good way to check yourself is to use the paper to recreate the outline. This is extremely useful for checking the organization of the paper. If the resulting outline says what you want it to say in an order that is easy to follow, the organization of your paper has been successful. If you discover that it's difficult to create an outline from what you have written, then you need to revise the paper. Your outline can help you with this, because the problems in the outline will show you where the paper has become disorganized.