

## FORMAL OUTLINING

Outlining is not the mysterious process many students think it is. Some students fail to reap the benefits of outlining because they make up their outlines after writing their papers. The purpose of the outline is to help you organize the ideas and logic of your paper before you write it.

Outlining is a process of subordination, subdividing a new level of ideas from the idea on the higher level. That is why each level of an outline must have at least two entries: If you have a I/i/1, you need a II/ii/2; if you haven an A/a, you need a B/b. If you have a “whole” idea in I, the fewest number of “parts” into which you can subdivide it is two; therefore, you need an A *and* a B. The relationship of “parts” of ideas to their “wholes” is shown in the indentation of the outline. The main points (“wholes”) are listed in the major headings, and supporting ideas (“parts”) for each point are listed as the subheadings. Consider the following diagram of an outline format and its subdivisions.

**Thesis:** The thesis appears before the outline exactly as it appears in the paper itself.

- I. Major idea
  - a. Supporting idea
    - i. Example or illustration for supporting idea
    - ii. Example or illustration for supporting idea
      - 1. Detail for example or illustration
      - 2. Detail for example or illustration
  - b. Supporting idea
- II. Major idea

Notice how every new level of subheadings is indented to line up under the first letter of the first word in the previous heading. Notice that for every I/i/1, there is a II/ii/2, and for every A/a, there is a B/b.

Two types of outlines are commonly used: the topic outline and the sentence outline. All headings in a topic outline are expressed in grammatically parallel phrases, meaning that headings in comparable positions are written in the same grammatical construction. The headings might be all nouns, all infinitive phrases, all gerund phrases, etc. In a sentence outline, each heading must be a complete sentence, but it is not necessary to make them all parallel.

Working from your outline to write your paper, you may develop your **topic sentences** from the major headings. A sentence outline especially accelerates this process since each idea is already in complete statement form. The subject/verb pattern in a sentence outline also establishes the logical direction of your thinking. You should be able to see as well if you have enough material to develop your topic and prove your thesis.

Carefully examine the topic outline below.

### Topic Outline

**Thesis:** In my years of driving, I have become aware of three types of drivers who tend to create havoc on the road and have learned to guard against them.

- I. Irresponsible drivers
  - a. Unaccountable to other drivers
  - b. Dangerous to other drivers
  - c. Defense: Keep a distance
- II. Stubborn drivers
  - a. Determined
  - b. Unsafe
  - c. Defense: Don't argue
- III. Absent-minded drivers
  - a. Heedless of surroundings
  - b. Unaware of their driving
  - c. Defense: Be ready to use the horn

Pay attention to the use of capitals and punctuation in the outline. Also, be aware that some instructors want students to add a line addressing the introduction and conclusion. If your instructor asks for that, follow his/her directions for incorporating these lines into the outline. Usually, the introduction and conclusion are not included in the outline because the outline lists the support for the thesis; consequently, it outlines the body paragraphs.

Now examine the sentence outline below. It uses the same subject as the topic outline but expands ideas into complete sentences. Pay attention to the indentation.

### Sentence Outline

**Thesis:** In my years of driving, I have become aware of three types of drivers who tend to create havoc on the road and have learned to guard against them.

- I. Irresponsible drivers refuse to be accountable for the welfare of others.
  - a. They speed through school zones.
  - b. They change lanes needlessly.
  - c. I have learned to keep a safe distance.
- II. Stubborn drivers insist on having their own way.
  - a. They drive in the left hand lane, forcing others to pass on the right.
  - b. They drive slowly, not allowing others to pass.
  - c. I don't try to argue with stubborn drivers.

- III. Absent-minded drivers are heedless of their surroundings and do not have their minds on what they are doing.
- a. They are oblivious of other cars.
  - b. They do not use turn signals.
  - c. They change lanes, ignoring others' cars.
  - d. I try to be ready to alert them by honking my horn.

Even if you don't use an outline in the prewriting and drafting stages, you might find it a helpful tool during revision. It may help you see where you need to develop ideas more fully or organize ideas more carefully. You might also find that outlining can be an effective way to take notes in class or at a meeting or lecture.

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The Roman numeral format was selected from the numbered list options in Microsoft Word 2007.

Content for this handout was borrowed and adapted from the following sources:

Hodges, John C., et. al. *Harbrace College Handbook*. 11<sup>th</sup> ed. San Diego: Harcourt, 1990.

Lester, James D., and James D. Lester, Jr. *Writing Research Papers*. 10<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Longman, 2002.