

## OUTLINING

Everybody knows what an outline is and does. It's a plan or map. It organizes ideas. It can be formal or informal. It's usually hierarchical, i.e., beginning with a major idea or point and proceeding to supporting points. You can number or letter an outline which shows relationships between ideas and facts.

The usual way to outline is to create a structure of your paper *before* you write it. However, outlines work best *after* you've brainstormed, freewrote, clustered, or listed. These are forms of prewriting (see our handout)—activities that help you get started, strategies to develop ideas prior to writing. Nevertheless, you can use an outline as a form of brainstorming.

If you're not a fan of outlining, don't make one. It's not a good use of time. For many, the outline and paper exist in different universes. Other techniques work just as well: journalistic questions, Tagmemics, clustering, cubing, listing or bulleting, freewriting, and so on. But if outlines are your thing, then follow the basic pattern: introduction/body/conclusion.

The most common/traditional type of outline is the *alphanumeric*, which uses roman numerals, capital letters, Arabic numerals, and lowercase letters:

- I. Introduction**
  - A. Thesis**
  - B. Roles/Arguments**
    - 1. First supporting example**

Each level should have at least two sublevels; define terms; use a source to reveal/explore the subject; highlight background to make the subject understandable (if appropriate); and so on.

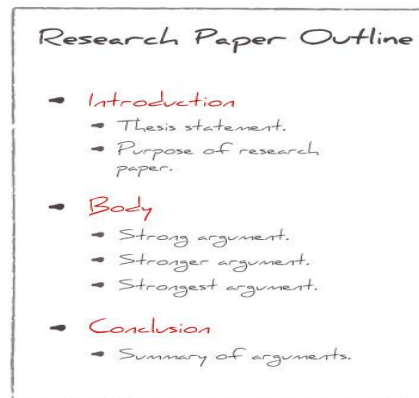
An outline reflects the logical divisions of a paper, not the physical divisions. In other words, it doesn't reflect every sentence or paragraph. Instead, it identifies major ideas to be developed in the paper. Thus, points on an outline indicate material developed at some depth in the paper.

You can also create a *full-sentence outline*, i.e., at each level you write a sentence. The sentence usually encapsulates or translates into a paragraph. This example is from Hunter College's RWC:

- I. College costs often exceed what middle-income families can comfortably afford**
- II. Low-income students face greater obstacles to higher education than middle-income students do.**
  - A. Federal programs now work to the disadvantage of low-income students.**
    - 1. With funding for grants “disproportionately lower” than funding for loans, fear of heavy debt makes low-income students unwilling to borrow.**

The benefits to this type of outline are several: ideas are fully stated; you see where you're going easier; strategy is defined more clearly.

Whichever style you choose, be consistent with your major and supporting points. The power of outlines is that they let you visualize the paper before it's written, give you a blueprint to follow, and combat writer's block.



## Reverse Outline

In this alternative to the traditional outline, you create the "reverse" structure *after* writing your draft. Here's the process:

**1. Read your paper out loud. As you read, look for info chunks about a specific topic or idea. Next to each chunk, write a word/phrase in the margin that describes what this chunk is about: "Leadership" or "Goals of X, Y, or Z." Do this for the whole paper.**

**2. List your descriptions on a separate sheet in the order they appear. This is your reverse outline. Essentially, you've turned your essay into a list of bullet points.**

**3. Now ask "Does this flow?" Is it clear how one idea connects to the other? Are there gaps in logic? Is there missing info? Are the paras unified? Are there too many ideas in a single para?**

You may discover things look sloppy. You may also see some paragraphs don't stick to one main point. If this happens, rethink the logic of your paper. Which idea should go first, second, and so on? Going back to your assignment may also reveal you left out something.

**4. Take the chunks and rearrange them in an order that does make sense. You can use headings to organize the sorting and take out the headings later. Or maybe the headings strengthen the structure.**

**5. Last, convert the chunks into paras and review the draft. You'll probably need to beef up one or more paras as well as create transitions, but most likely you'll have more coherence and unity.**

As for benefits, a reverse outline helps you see the **structure** of your paper clearly, immediately. It's a great way to start revising, provided you have a first draft that contains the essential ideas and research for the assignment. Finally, the reverse outline **saves time** and as a technique **strengthens writing skills**, adds another form of knowledge to your hoard, and that in turn develops confidence. Whether traditional, reverse, or instinctual, an outline helps you navigate. With practice and a little luck, it can even help you uncork the words you need to begin writing.