



## How Do I Outline—and Why?

*A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,  
Adored by statesman and philosophers and divines.*

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

As this quote indicates, the New England philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson wasn't overly concerned with being consistent. Where research papers are concerned, however, consistency and order are essential. And there's no better way to show the order of your ideas than with an *outline*. The purpose of an outline is to organize the material you're going to use to prove your thesis. If your information isn't arranged in a logical fashion, your reader won't be able to understand your point.

### Why Create an Outline

Some instructors will require you to submit a formal outline with your research paper. These instructors understand that an outline serves as a preview tool that allows them to grasp your thesis and organization at a glance. It explains the scope and direction of your paper as well.

Whether or not you're required to submit an outline with your final paper, making an outline is a superb way to help you construct and classify your ideas. In addition, an

outline serves as a final check that your paper is unified and coherent. It helps you see where you need to revise and edit your writing, too.

## How to Create an Outline

While outlining is not difficult, it can be challenging to get started. The following suggestions can make the task easier.

1. First, arrange your notes in a logical order that you can follow as you write. If you're having difficulty seeing an order, look for clues in the sequence of your ideas. You can make a diagram, such as a flowchart, to help you visualize the best order to use.
2. Jot down major headings.
3. Sort the material to fit under the headings. Revise the headings, order, or both, as necessary.
4. Look for relationships among ideas and group them as subtopics.
5. Try to avoid long lists of subtopics. Consider combining these into related ideas. In nearly all cases, your paper will be better for having linked related ideas.
6. If you can't decide where to put something, put it in two or more places in the outline. As you write, you can decide which place is the most appropriate.
7. If you're not sure that an idea fits, write yourself a reminder to see where it belongs after you've written your first draft.
8. If an important idea doesn't fit, write a new outline with a place for it. If it's important, it belongs in the paper.
9. Accept your outline as a working draft. Revise and edit as you proceed.
10. After you finish your outline, let it sit for a few days. Then look back at it and see what ideas don't seem to fit, which points need to be expanded, and so on. No matter how carefully you construct your outline, it will inevitably change. Don't be discouraged by these changes; they are part of the writing process.

## Form of an Outline

Outlines are written in a specific form, observing specific rules. The following section shows this format.

### Model

*Thesis statement:* Write your thesis statement here.

- I. Major topics or paragraphs are indicated by Roman numerals. These are made by using the capitals I, V, or X on your keyboard.
  - A. Subheads are indicated by capital letters.
    1. Details are indicated by numbers, followed by a period.
      - a. More specific details are indicated with lower-case letters.
      - b. These are written a, b, c, and so forth.
    2. Begin each entry with a capital letter.
  - B. You can have as many entries as you like, but there must be at least two in each category.
    1. You cannot have a I without a II.
    2. You cannot have an A without a B.
    3. You cannot have a 1 without a 2.
    4. You cannot have a lower case a without a lower case b.
- II. Entries should be in parallel order.
  - A. Entries may be word entries.
  - B. Entries may be phrase entries.
  - C. Entries may be sentence entries.

For sample completed outlines, see the model research papers at the end of this guidebook.

## Types of Outlines

There are several types of outlines, two of which are discussed below: jotted outlines and working outlines.

### JOTTED OUTLINE

A *jotted outline* is a sketch of an outline, a list of the major points you want to cover. A jotted outline is a useful way to organize your thoughts because you can see what you're including at a glance. Here's a model of a jotted outline:

### Model

*Thesis:* Since cigarette smoking creates many problems for the general public, it should be outlawed in all public places.

- I. Harms health
  - A. Lung disease
  - B. Circulatory disease
- II. Causes safety problems
  - A. Destroys property
  - B. Causes fires
- III. Sanitation problems
  - A. Soils the possessions
  - B. Causes unpleasant odors
- IV. Conclusion

### WORKING OUTLINE

A *working outline*, in contrast, is more fully fleshed out than a jotted outline. Expanded and divided into topics and subtopics, it helps you create a map as you draft your research paper. An effective working outline has the following parts:

1. Introduction
2. Thesis
3. Major topics and subtopics
4. Major transitions
5. Conclusion

Usually, the entries are written as sentences. Here's a model of a working outline, expanded from the previous jotted outline. Note that the entries are written as complete sentences.

### Model

*Thesis:* Since cigarette smoking creates many problems for the general public, it should be outlawed in all public places.

- I. Cigarette smoke harms the health of the public.
  - A. Cigarette smoke may lead to serious diseases in nonsmokers.
    - I. It leads to lung disease.
      - a. It causes cancer.
      - b. It causes emphysema.

2. It leads to circulatory disease in nonsmokers.

- a. It causes strokes.

- b. It causes heart disease.

- B. Cigarette smoke worsens other less serious health conditions.

1. It aggravates allergies in nonsmokers.

2. It causes pulmonary infections to become chronic.

3. It can lead to chronic headache.

- II. Cigarette smoking causes safety problems.

- A. Burning ash may destroy property.

- B. Burning cigarettes may cause serious fires.

- III. Cigarette smoke leads to sanitation problems.

- A. Ash and tar soil the possessions of others.

- B. Ash and tar cause unpleasant odors and fog the air.

- IV. Conclusions

- A. Cigarette smoking injures people's health and so should be banned in all public places.

- B. Cigarette smoking damages property and so should be banned in all public places.

### Warning!

In general, a standard high school or college research paper should have no more than four or five main points. This means you shouldn't have more than four or five Roman numerals in your outline. If you have too many ideas, your paper will either be too long or more likely, vague and overly general.

Chapter 13 covers the elements of research paper style to help you craft a research paper that suits your audience, purpose, and topic.