

**When is an outline helpful?** An outline can be helpful for almost any writing assignment, especially longer assignments that require incorporating many ideas. An outline helps you lay out the information you have and see how it interconnects, as well as showing you what information might be missing. Used correctly, an outline can show you both what you have to say and the best, most coherent way to say it.

Outlines are also very helpful for most speeches. They can help you organize your thoughts and ensure that you move smoothly from one point to another while giving an oral presentation.

**How can I start?** The easiest way to start an outline is first to brainstorm all the ideas you have about the topic without worrying about order. Once you have your ideas written out, you can begin to arrange them. Usually, you can see places where ideas overlap. Consolidate these ideas into a single section of the outline. Brainstorming will often show you which ideas you think are most important.

**What kinds of outlines are there?** The two main types of outlines are the topic outline and the sentence outline. The major difference between the two is simply that while the headings in a topic outline are only a word or phrase, the headings in a sentence outline are complete sentences.

**What is the basic structure of an outline?** In the typical structure of an outline, the headings, which are the main topic of each section, are accompanied by a Roman numeral. Under the headings, further ideas are marked with a letter. Ideas beneath the letter are marked with a number, and sub-ideas of those ideas are marked with a lower-case letter.

Example of a topic outline:

- I. Colonialism in *The Tempest*
  - A. Caliban's enslavement
    - 1. Used to be ruler of the island
    - 2. Is forced out by Prospero's arrival
      - a. Is treated kindly at first
      - b. Is then imprisoned
  - B. Historical connections

**Quick Tip:** A general rule of outlines is that when there is an A, there is a B; when there is a 1, there is a 2; and so on.

**How should I order an outline?** Most outlines move from the general to the specific in each section. The outline should begin with an introduction that lays out the general ideas of the paper and includes a thesis, and then move on to points that support the overarching thesis.

Each section should also move from the general to the specific. The heading of each section of the outline should be a general idea in support of the thesis. Under that main idea is supporting information—specific evidence about your subject that bolsters the idea.

**How many sections do I need?** It is usually best to have a section for each distinct idea, including a section for the introduction and for the conclusion. This generally corresponds to about one Roman numeral per paragraph. A good way to gauge if you have enough ideas for

your paper is to see if your number of sections, not counting the introduction and conclusion sections, roughly corresponds to your suggested page count.

**What is a reverse outline?** A reverse outline can be helpful *after* you have written a draft of your paper, to help you see how clearly you have developed your ideas. Take a copy of your paper and, in the left margin, write the main idea you can identify in each paragraph. In the right margin, write the evidence in each paragraph that advances the main idea. This shows you how your paper progresses. If the reverse outline is difficult to complete quickly and concisely, your paragraphs may be too convoluted. If, when reading the reverse outline over, you find it difficult to follow, you may need to edit your paper to make the logical flow more clear.

#### Works Cited

“Reverse Outlining: An Exercise for Taking Notes and Revising Your Work.” Purdue Online Writing Lab, 17 April 2010. Web. 20 November 2013.

“Why and How to Create a Useful Outline.” Purdue Online Writing Lab, 17 April 2010. Web. 20 November 2013.

“How to Write an Outline.” Los Angeles Valley College Library. Web. 20 November 2013.