

Outlining Conventions

General Outlines use symbols (a number or a letter at the beginning of the section, subsection, or idea), punctuation, and indentation to show relationships between sections, subsections, and ideas. For example an outline may use roman numerals to denote major divisions, capital letters to indicate first subdivisions or subsections, Arabic numerals and lower case letters to specify further subordination, and Arabic numerals within parentheses and then small letters within parentheses to obtain additional breakdowns. To establish a relationship between section and subsections:

- Use the same symbols for content of equal importance.
- Use symbols in pairs to show a division of ideas. For example if the outline contains heading A, then it must be followed by heading B.
- Place the symbols in a vertical line to emphasize relationship of ideas and increase the ease of reading. For example, make the first level of symbols flush with the left-hand margin, and after that indent five spaces for each successive symbol.

Constructing an Outline

An outline is a visual, organized conception of how the parts of an essay or a research paper will fit together. An outline presents ideas and material in a logical format that shows relationships and groupings. Outlines can be informal, personalized notes made by the writer to themselves. However, instructors will often require outlines with specific structuring guidelines.

Suggested steps in making a formal outline: 1) decide the purpose, thesis, and audience of the paper; 2) list all ideas and information to be included—do not worry about structure at this stage—brainstorm freely; 3) group points that are related to one another; 4) for each group, arrange the ideas and information from general topics to specific details or from abstract concepts to concrete theories and applications; and 5) use Roman numerals, letters, or decimals to indicate levels of the material's importance and indent each line to show where a new level of importance begins.

- I. First main topic
 - A. First subordinate idea
 - 1. First supporting idea
 - a. First supporting detail

- 1.0 First main topic
 - 1.1 First subordinate idea
 - 1.1.1 First supporting idea
 - 1.1.1.1 First supporting detail

NOTE: Roman numerals in conjunction with letters comprise the most common outline format. Outline headings may follow either topic or sentence structure. Topic outlines use words or phrases and no punctuation. Sentence outlines use complete sentences and proper punctuation. Generally, an outline follows topic or sentence structure, but it cannot follow both styles.