

Outlines

An outline is a diagram of the structure of your essay. It shows how you will divide up your topic and in what order you will present your material. It also shows how the main divisions of your topic will be broken down into subdivisions.

If you construct an outline as you plan your essay, you can see the shape of your essay in advance. As you write the essay, the outline will help you stay on track. If you decide to write the first draft of your essay without setting up an outline in advance, abstracting an outline from your draft is a useful method for checking logic and structure.

The two kinds of formal outlines are **TOPIC OUTLINES** and **SENTENCE OUTLINES**. Each entry in a topic outline is a word or a phrase, whereas each entry in a sentence outline is a complete sentence.

Topic Outline:

1. The first step is to list the main divisions of your topic. If, for example, you are setting out to show the advantages and disadvantages of Whistler Mountain as a site for Winter Olympics, your essay will naturally fall into two main divisions. Since these divisions will run parallel in the structure of the essay, they are phrased in a parallel way. List them after capital Roman numerals:

- I. Advantages of Whistler
- II. Disadvantages of Whistler

2. Your second step is to take each entry in turn, and break it down. In this case, you would ask yourself what main kinds of advantages and disadvantages you will show. List these after indented capital letters:

- I. Advantages of Whistler
 - A. Natural advantages of site
 - B. Economic benefits for Lower Mainland
 - C. Benefits for Canadian skiers
- II. Disadvantages of Whistler
 - A. Uncertain weather
 - B. Transportation problems

3. If you are writing a long essay, you may wish to introduce a third level of subdivision. This material is listed after Arabic numerals, which are indented one step further. In this case, you would list the specific advantages and disadvantages you will show:

- I. Advantages of Whistler
 - A. Natural advantages of site
 - 1. Variety and length of runs
 - 2. Spectacular scenery
 - 3. Good quality of snow
 - B. Economic benefits for Whistler area
 - 1. World-wide publicity
 - 2. Money spent by visitors
 - C. Benefits for local skiers
 - 1. Advantages in competing on home territory
 - 2. Increased local interest in competitive skiing
- II. Disadvantages of Whistler
 - A. Uncertain weather
 - 1. Frequent lack of snow on lower runs
 - 2. Frequent poor visibility
 - B. Transportation problems
 - 1. Treacherousness of Squamish Highway
 - 2. Inadequacy of gondola

As you go through these stages, keep several principles in mind:

1. Outlining means listing and dividing. You cannot divide without creating two or more parts, and so you should not have an **A** without a **B**, or a **1** without a **2**.

*Wrong:*I. Advantages
 A. Sunny climate
II. Disadvantages
 A. **High cost of food**

If you don't need two parts, don't divide at all.

2. A subdivision must belong under that main division, not somewhere else in the essay. You couldn't list "pub life in the village" as one of the natural advantages of Whistler.
3. Each item of material must appear only once, to avoid redundancy in the essay. Don't list "closeness to Vancouver" under natural advantages and then again under economic advantages.

4. Items at the same level of generality must match up. Each entry at the most general level will require several paragraphs for full development, and each entry at the most specific level will require one paragraph or less.
5. Use parallel phrasing whenever you can: make the structure clear rather than obscuring it.

Wrong:

1. Dangers of existing highway
2. We could build a new highway, but it would be very costly

Right:

1. Dangers of existing highway
2. High cost of a new highway

6. Outlining applies to the body or substance of your essay, and not your introduction or conclusion. So although you may wish to state your thesis before your first Roman numeral entry, do not give a number to your introductory paragraph.

Wrong:

- I. Introduction
- II. Advantages of Whistler

Right:

Thesis Statement: While Whistler Mountain would offer an attractive site for the Winter Olympics, it has some significant disadvantages.

- I. Advantages of Whistler

Of course, this is not the only way of setting up the Whistler Mountain essay. An alternative outline might take each main topic in turn and pit the advantages against the disadvantages. So the first two levels of subdivision would look like this:

- I. Natural considerations
 - A) Advantages
 - B) Disadvantages
- II. Economic considerations
 - A) Advantages
 - B) Disadvantages

Sentence Outline:

The sentence outline takes the process of planning one step beyond the topic outline. In a sentence outline, every point is written out in sentence form. So you think about not only the

order of topics, but what main idea you will develop about each one. Writing the sentence outline

- Clarifies your thoughts as you organize your information
- Helps you see where there are gaps in information, and where to place the information you have
- Adds somewhat to the preparation time for an essay, but cuts the writing time.

Sentence outlines are particularly useful for essays which develop complex ideas. If you are writing an argument, for example, you need to articulate in advance what main point you will make in each section. This main point will govern your search for supporting material. A topic alone would not give such clear direction.

Because it contains all the points to be made in the essay, a completed sentence outline should read like a summary. If the sentence outline is coherent, you know in advance that your essay will be too.

The conventions which govern topic outlines also govern sentence outlines; the material is displayed in the form that makes the relationship of general to specific immediately visible. Note that, while the sentence outline always begins with a statement of the thesis or question to be addressed, the introduction and conclusion are not numbered as main sections of the essay.

Here is a sample sentence outline.

Why Not Learn Italian?

To learn a foreign language has always been one of my aims.

THESIS: It's not as hard as one thinks to learn Italian.

- I. There are several schools in the city where Italian is taught.
 - A. Courses are offered in several high schools.
 - B. If you're too old for high school, night school also offers Italian.
 - C. Some colleges and both universities offer basic grammar and conversation.

- II. It is also possible to learn with a private tutor.
 - A. Tutors are available in all areas of the Lower Mainland.
 - B. Most tutors are willing to teach at a time convenient to the student.

- III. Our large Italian community organizes many activities in which anyone can participate, and which offer the opportunity to speak and hear Italian.
 - A. The Italian Cultural Centre runs a regular schedule of events.
 - B. Italian films are regularly shown in two East Vancouver cinemas.
 - C. Corpus Christi festival is held each year in the area of Commercial Drive.

- IV. Reading material is also easy to obtain
 - A. The Italian newspaper is the largest in Canada
 - B. Italian books are available at several public libraries.

We're very lucky, in Vancouver, to have access to Italian language and culture.

Note! An outline can be a useful planning tool, especially for students who have difficulty with essay organization. However, an outline is not a straightjacket. You may discover new ways to divide your materials as you write your essay. If so, make the necessary changes to your outline as you go.