

What is an outline?

Outlines are a great way to help you figure out your ideas and organize them within your paper. Outlines are typically used at the beginning of the writing process and they help you see how your ideas and research fit together both on a paragraph level and at the overall level. Although there are different formats, the information in your outline generally matches the three parts of an essay: Introduction, Body Paragraphs, and Conclusion,

You can also create reverse outlines after you write your paper. For more information, see “How to Make a Reverse Outline.”

How do you create an outline?

There are many ways to create an outline. In general, you will follow these steps:

1. Identify the thesis or central topic of your project.
2. Identify the main topics that fit under or are related to your thesis that you want to talk about in your project. For this step, do not worry about how all of your ideas fit together, just list everything you ideally would like to cover.
3. Go through your ideas and try to group them together according to topic or relevancy. You should be able to come up with a main idea or topic sentence for each grouping of ideas. Any ideas that do not fit together in a cohesive way should be put aside for the moment.
4. After grouping your ideas, decide which should logically be covered first in your paper and make that your first body category. Then arrange the rest of your ideas logically. Remember, each big idea should develop the thesis or idea in your introduction. These ideas generally make up your body paragraphs.
5. After identifying your main ideas, identify any sub ideas or categories that go under each major topic. This is generally your evidence. (This step can also be done at the same time as Step 4.)
6. Finally, after your outline is created, look it over to make sure that your ideas develop your thesis and flow logically from one another. If anything does not seem to make sense, you might want to reorganize your outline or consider removing that particular point.

What should the outline look like?

There are two basic ways to format an outline: by ideas/topics or by full sentences.

- **Topic Outlines:** use short phrases or sentences to make the outline. This type of outline is helpful for organizing and seeing how all of your ideas fit together.
- **Full-Sentence Outlines:** are more detailed and use full sentences to make the outline. This type of outline is helpful to organize complex ideas or when you have lots of detailed information you would like to include. This type of outline can also be easy to transform into the paper because much of your information is already in sentences.

When choosing a method, consider what kind of project you are working on and how you as a writer work best. If you need more help organizing your paper on a larger scale, the topic outline might be the better choice. However, if your ideas are more complex, it might be more helpful to use the full-sentence outline.

See the following Example Outline¹

¹ *Outlines adapted from Hacker/Sommers (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2010).

General Outline Structure

1. Introduction
 - a. Hook
 - b. Brief background information
 - c. Thesis
2. Body paragraph/Main point #1
 - a. Supporting detail #1
 - b. Supporting detail #2
3. Body paragraph/Main point #2
 - a. Supporting detail #1
 - b. Supporting detail #2
4. Conclusion
 - a. Restate thesis
 - b. Wrap up/summarize argument
 - c. Gesture towards larger picture or discussion

Remember: Individualize your outline according to the specific assignment requirements.

Sample Full-Sentence Outline*

1. Introduction
 - a. Thesis: Although companies often have legitimate concerns that lead them to monitor employees’ Internet usage—from expensive security breaches to reduced productivity—the benefits of electronic surveillance are outweighed by its costs to employees’ privacy and autonomy.
2. Although employers have always monitored employees, electronic surveillance is more efficient.
 - a. Employers can gather data in large quantities
 - b. Electronic surveillance can be continuous
3. Some experts argue that employers have legitimate reasons to monitor employees’ Internet usage.
 - a. Unmonitored employees could accidentally breach security.
 - b. Companies are legally accountable for the online actions of employees.
4. Conclusion

Sample Topic Outline*

1. Introduction
 - a. Thesis: Benefits of electronic surveillance outweigh lack of privacy
2. More efficient
 - a. Large quantities
 - b. Continuous surveillance
3. Legitimate reasons
 - a. Security issues
 - b. Company accountability
4. Conclusion