

Making a Formal Outline

A formal outline helps you organize your ideas and present them in a logical order. It also serves as a guide when you write.

In an outline, you move from the general to the specific. The main points that you have chosen to support your thesis statement are general points or ideas.

The details that you use to support your main points will include examples and explanations that are specific. It is very important that the relationship between your main points and supporting details makes sense to your audience.

Here is the format you should follow when you make your outline:

Each section headed by a Roman numeral will become a paragraph when you write your paper.

Supporting details may be further explained by adding Arabic numerals and lowercase letters below a capital letter. This information will provide examples or additional details. Remember: If you have a 1, you must have a 2. If you have an a, you must have a b, and so on.

- I. Introduction – Grabber, Background Information, and Thesis Statement
- II. Main point #1
 - A. Supporting detail
 - B. Supporting detail
 - C. Supporting detail
- III. Main point #2
 - A. Supporting detail
 - B. Supporting detail
 - C. Supporting detail
- IV. Main point #3
 - A. Supporting detail
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - B. Supporting detail
 1.
 - a.
 - b.
 - 2.
 - C. Supporting detail
- V. Conclusion – Summary Statement and Closer

Each supporting detail should be closely related to the main point.

The first word in every heading begins with a capital letter. Sentence outlines (but not topic outlines) have a period at the end of each heading.

Two Types of Outlines

Topic Outlines

In a topic outline, the headings and subheading are a series of words or phrases, not complete sentences. A topic outline tends to be quick and easy to write.

Example:

- I. Native American “code talkers” during World Wars I and II
 - A. Who they were
 1. Their tribes
 2. Their languages
 - B. What they did
 - C. Why they were so successful
 1. Spoken (not written) languages
 2. Languages totally unfamiliar to enemy code breakers

Sentence Outlines

In a sentence outline, every heading and subheading is a complete sentence. A sentence outline takes more time but has two advantages over a topic outline. First of all, it furnishes ready-made topic sentences for your paragraphs. Secondly, it forces you to summarize what you are going to say about each topic, which can reveal problems in the organization of your ideas.

Example:

- I. Native Americans served successfully as “code talkers” in the United States Armed Forces during World Wars I and II.
 - A. They were fluent speakers of their native languages.
 1. They were Choctaw, Navajo, Comanche, Winnebago, Kiowa, and Cherokee.
 2. Each tribe spoke a unique language.
 - B. Code talkers transmitted military information via walkie-talkie radios and field telephones to other speakers of their language.
 - C. Enemy code breakers were unable to understand the American Indians’ languages.
 1. Almost all were spoken languages only and had not written form.
 2. These tribal languages were totally unfamiliar to outsiders.