

Some Notes on Outlining

Purposes

The rules below are designed to encourage outlining, not as a way to organize material (although it will help do that), but as a way of developing an idea, making it comprehensive and clear.

Basics

Outlining involves arranging (logically or sequentially) ideas or arguments in relationship to each other. I recommend the following form:

- I.
 - A.
 - 1.
 - a.
 - i.
 - (I)

Outline the body of your piece. Introductions and conclusions should lie outside the outline (although they may have outlines of their own).

There really is no “best” way to time when you outline. Some people prefer to outline before they write and to use the outline to write. Others prefer to write first, then to outline what they have written, revise the outline, and then revise the text. I actually prefer the latter, but try both and decide which works best for you.

Terminology

- *level*: Instantiated in an outline by use of a particular symbol type. Thus, **I.** is one level, **A.** is another.
- *higher, lower in the outline*: Refers to the level, not to where you are on the page. Thus, point **III.A.** is higher on the outline than **I.C.2.a.**
- *Main points*: Any level of the outline can be a main point. What makes something a main point is having subordinate points arrayed under it. Main points are defined by being elaborated (subdivided or explicated) or proven by their subpoints. The relationship between main points and subpoints is logical, not just sequential. Thus, point **I.B.3.a.** may be a main point with subpoints **I.B.3.a.i.** and **I.B.3.a.ii.** In addition, of course, **I.B.3.a.** is itself a subpoint of **I.B.3.**
- *Subordinate points*: Subordinate points divide, explicate, or prove main points. The relationship of subordinate points to main points is dependent.
- *Coordinated points*: Points on the same level of the outline. Thus, **I.** and **II.** are coordinate points, as are **A.** and **B.**, **1.** and **2.**, and so forth. Coordinated points must be at equivalent level of abstraction and generally should be the same type of outline.
- *Outline unit*: Refers to a main point and its associated subpoints. Remember that any level can be an outline unit as long as you have a main point and its associated subpoints. Thus, **II.A.** and its subpoints **II.A.1.**, **II.A.2.**, and **II.A.3.** are an outline unit.

Types of Outline

- **Word**: Use of a single word to represent ideas. Such outlines have as their main purpose stimulating your memory.
- **Phrase**: Phrases resemble words in their use and function. They simply use multiple words.
- **Sentence**: No rocket scientist needed here. Just means that all points are in complete, simple or complex sentences.
- **Argumentative**: Requires sentences but makes the additional stipulation that the sentences be claims. Subpoints then become explication or proof of the claim.

These types are arranged by increasing power. In general, the higher in the outline, the more powerful the form should be. Thus, word type should hardly ever be used at the **I.** level; the **I.** level will nearly always be best argumentative.

Checking an Outline

The key to outline use is to do a good job of checking an outline and revising on that basis. Here are the basic checks you should use:

1. **Check form in your outline:**
 - a. **Have you set up the outline without shortcuts?** No shortcuts! Indent properly, and indent all subsequent lines in a point to make the outline readable.
 - b. **Does each point meet the requirements of the outline type that you have chosen?**
 - c. **Is each point simple or complex, rather than compound?** That is, if translated into a sentence form would each point form simple or complex sentences? If you have a compound, then you need to develop a wording that transcends the difference and make the multiple parts of the compound subpoints.
2. **Check subordination of points:** For each outline unit ask:
 - a. **Does each subordinate point relate directly to the main point?**
 - b. **Is the relationship of the subordinate point dependent to the main point?** In other words, does the subordinate point divide, explicate, or provide proof for the main point?
3. **Check coordination of points:** For each outline unit ask:
 - a. **Do all units with subordinate points have at least two subordinate points?** No level of the outline should have only one point. Thus, every **I.** has a **II.**; every **A.** a **B.**; and so forth. If there is a point without a coordinate point, then you need to rewrite the main point to include the idea of the single subpoint or discover the additional subpoint that is left out.
 - b. **Are all subpoints of the same type?** An entire outline need not use the same type, but in general all of the points on a particular level should be the same type.
4. **Sufficiency of subpoints:** For each outline unit ask: **Do the subpoints, taken as a whole, do what you need to do to divide, explicate, or prove the main point?**
5. **Sequencing of subpoints:** Once the other checks are completed, look over the subpoints to see that they are ordered in their most powerful way.

Fixing an Outline

Strangely, people sometimes forget the different ways that you fix an outline. Notice that the fixes affect the logic of your work, not the sequential organization.

- **Elaborate a main point with additional subpoints.**
- **Add another level to your outline.** Sometimes you need to elaborate a point that had not been elaborated. Sometimes the relationship of a subpoint to a point is too remote and an intervening level is necessary.
- **Invent or rewrite a main point to fix the focus of a set of subpoints.** Not an unusual operation. The main point is invented to give the subpoints a logical relationship to each other by giving them a focus. If you cannot establish the proper relationships among the main point and all subpoints, you need to rearrange the outline until you can.
- **Rewrite compounds into simple or complex sentences.** This technique also forces more focus on your ideas. It forces you to understand what unites your various points. Complex sentences tend to assert relationships; simple sentences assert facts.
- **Rearrange items.**
- **Alter the type or form of an outline level.** Although this seems a fairly minor point, altering the form can suddenly reveal that the organizational sequence may make sense, but the logic of the material fails for a missing element. Thus, pushing your outline toward an argumentative outline may be a powerful move.