



## What Is an Outline?

**What Is an Outline?** An outline is a skeletal representation of the sequence of the main ideas in your essay. The sequence of ideas/topics also serves as a guide for the reader(s) of your paper.

### Two Purposes of an Outline

- **For You as a Writer (this is the “working outline”):** You may draft a *working* outline in order to organize the sections of your paper as you list the major ideas/topics you plan to discuss. You may add minor topics and supporting details as your research continues. In the research and drafting processes, you may need to revise the information included in your working outline as new information comes to light.
- **For Your Instructor (this is the “final outline”):** A formal outline is often required as part of your assignment. The most important aspect of the *final* outline is that it is truly representative of your actual paper. If a topic is in your outline but not *adequately* discussed in your paper, revision is necessary. To serve as a guide for the reader, the final outline must accurately reflect the content of your paper. The formal outline to be submitted with your paper must follow MLA formatting.

### About the Working Outline

The working outline does not need to be written in any specific format. It is for your own use, an informal rough draft of tentative information that you may use or discard later. You may write a working outline in whatever form seems most helpful for you. By the time you have finished your research and begun your paper, you should have a nearly complete outline to edit and use as your *final* outline.

### About the Formal Outline

The standard format for a formal outline includes large Roman numerals for the main headings, capital letters for subtopics and Arabic numerals for the sub-subtopics. To find specific information regarding correct spacing and alignment, consult your English handbook or the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* for detailed instruction and sample outlines. See a brief example of an outline on the following page.

*(Important note: Please see the discussion about “Paired Headings” on the back of this page.)*

## Outline

Thesis Statement: There are benefits as well as drawbacks to purchasing a home.

### I. Benefits of purchasing a home

A. Financial investment

B. Personal privacy

### II. Drawbacks to purchasing a home

A. Financial commitment

B. Costly maintenance

## Things to Consider About Outlines

- **Thesis Statement:** Most outlines begin with the thesis statement, aligned to the left and placed directly below the heading (Title) of your outline.
- **Sentence Outline OR Topic Outline:** Consistency is the key to writing your outline. If your outline is in sentence form, all parts of it (major topics, minor topics, supporting details) must be in sentence form. If your outline is written in words, and phrases, all of it must be in that form. The main point to remember is that your outline will be one or the other, all sentences or all words and phrases, not a combination of both.
- **Paired Headings:** If you have a I., you must have at least a II. If you have an A., you must have a B. If you have a 1., you must have a 2. There is never a division without at least two headings, although you may have several more than two.
- **Comparable Numerals or Letters:** Like headings are also of equal significance to your paper. The B or C following an A is of comparable importance to the A. If the paired headings do not seem aligned, one being a minor point and the other a major area of discussion, you may need to move headings and subheadings around in the working outline to create smooth transition of ideas and information.
- **Coherence:** Your outline will reflect the progression of ideas in each section of your paper, from major topics to minor topics to supporting details or further information. In organizing your outline, you should find that you have grouped topics in a logical order, and you will be able to see at a glance if you have done so.

### Remember:

Your topics, headings, etc. should be written in grammatically parallel structure. In addition, your goal is to organize your outline, as you will your paper, with clear divisions

between major and minor points and with a logical progression of thought and balanced divisions.