



School of Liberal Arts

University Writing Center

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Cavanaugh Hall 427      University Library 2125

(317)274-2049                      (317)278-8171

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## *Making an Outline*

*Organizing your thoughts is important because nobody likes to sort through a confused and confusing jumble of words and sentences. Some writers find it helpful to use some sort of outline from the very start of their writing process, and others come to that step later, after they have used some of the techniques such as freewriting or clustering (idea maps, "bubble maps") to get some ideas on paper so they can see what they want to write. Experienced writers use all different types of outlines, depending on their own preferences, the material they are working with, and the requirements of their audience.*

*The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing* (used in W130 and W131 classes Fall 1999 to the present) lists several kinds of outlines that may be helpful to different writers at different points in the writing process. They suggest these possibilities: a "scratch outline" early in the process, "nutshelling" the argument (six short exercises), writing a working thesis and main points, using a tree diagram, developing a flow chart, or doing a traditional outline with Roman numerals, capital letters, Arabic numerals, and lower case letters. (See pp. 506-11.) Here are some steps they suggest for the various kinds of outlines.

- **The scratch outline:** write the point the paper will make (the thesis), and then write a few sentences indicating your position on the various points the paper will make. For example, a scratch outline might list the thesis, "Schools should not use metal detectors as a way of reducing violence," and then list four or five reasons the writer wants to cover. At this stage the writer might even include a question about some possible material.
- **"Nutshelling"** involves answering six prompts about the subject:
  - What puzzle or problem initiated your thinking about X?
  - Before reading my paper, my readers will think this about my topic: \_\_\_\_\_; after reading my paper, readers will think this new way about my topic.
  - The purpose of my paper is \_\_\_\_\_.
  - My paper addresses the following question: \_\_\_\_\_.
  - My one-sentence summary answer to the above question is this:  
\_\_\_\_\_.
  - A tentative title for my paper is this: \_\_\_\_\_.
- **Working thesis and main points:** Write the working thesis ("working" means you reserve the right to change it if that seems a good idea later). Then you indicate what the main sections or chunks needed in the paper are.
- **Tree diagram:** this looks like a cut-away section of the roots of a tree. At the trunk or taproot, place the thesis. Then indicate the major sub-points below the thesis. Under each major sub-point, place the next level of development.
- **The flowchart** (familiar from business applications) indicates by a series of boxes connected by lines or arrows what points will be discussed in what order.
- **The traditional outline** uses Roman numerals for the major subdivisions of the ideas, then capital letters, then Arabic numerals, and then lower-case letters. Since each lower level in the outline represents a subdivision of the category above it, any I needs a II, any A needs a B, etc. Here is the example of a formal outline from Allyn & Bacon:

Thesis: Except for schools with severe threats of danger, metal detectors should not be used because there is no basis for panic and because there are other, more effective, and less costly alternatives for violence prevention in schools.

- I. Media have created panic over school violence.
  - A. School violence is actually quite rare.
  - B. Frequency of weapons being brought to school has declined since 1993.
- II. There are many strong arguments against use of metal detectors.
  - A. Metal detectors may violate student rights.
    1. Student quotations reveal belief that metal detectors violate their rights.
    2. Court rulings leave gray areas.
  - B. Metal detectors are easily defeated.
    1. They can't close off all entrances.
    2. A shooter can always find a way to get guns inside.
  - C. Metal detectors are costly.
  - D. Metal detectors have bad psychological consequences for students.
    1. Quotations from students show students' dislike of prison atmosphere.
    2. Metal detectors create feelings of distrust and humiliation.
- III. Schools could use the money spent on metal detectors to provide a better school atmosphere.
  - A. Quotation from high school senior Malik Barry-Buchanan shows need to create respect and caring in the schools.
  - B. Article by Poland shows need to make schools more personal and to provide more counseling.
    1. Teachers should make efforts to know each student as an individual.
    2. Extracurricular activities should not be cut.
    3. Schools should provide more counseling.
- IV. Conclusion

(Note how much more helpful the complete sentences are than just phrases in the above outline. Sticklers for formal correctness want the periods, rather than the left side of the Roman numerals, to be lined up.)

To encourage careful reading and to help students appreciate the underlying organization of a piece of writing, some instructors ask students to outline a document they have been assigned to read. Here the process is to read the assigned text carefully noting the main point and the major sub-points. If the text has subtitles over sections, converting those headings into complete sentences can disclose the underlying organizational structure of the piece. Size and design of headings may also indicate which level is appropriate. Usually such assignments assume the use of the formal outline.

Source:

Ramage, John D., John C. Bean, and June Johnson. *The Allyn & Bacon guide to Writing*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Longman, 2003.