

# Outlines



*Writing Center*

989-964-6061, [www.svsu.edu/writingcenter](http://www.svsu.edu/writingcenter)

**Outlines** serve several purposes. Sometimes they are a formal requirement for papers. However, they can also serve as a useful planning strategy during the pre-writing process or as a guide to revising. Outlines may also help a writer set up headings in the paper. Thus outlines guide both the reader and the writer:

For the paper's reader:

- They present an overview of the structure and the information contained in the paper

For the paper's writer:

- They provide a mechanism for developing the paper's organization
- They can show flaws in organization, argument, and development, to guide revising

Outlines can be either formal or informal, depending on the requirements:

**Informal** outlines have few restrictions and can provide a useful way for writers to personally plan and revise their writing. They usually include a thesis statement followed by the main divisions and sub-topics that will be included in the paper.

**Formal** outlines may be topic or sentence outlines (see back); both adhere to rather strict conventions in order to provide a clear layout of the paper's organization and content.

*Thesis statement* (if required):

- I. First main point
  - A. First sub-topic
    1. First division of sub-topic
      - a. First supporting evidence
      - b. Second supporting evidence
      - c. Third supporting evidence
    2. Second division of sub-topic
  - B. Second sub-topic (may be expanded as above)
- II. Second main point

(Continue with as many sections as needed.)

Within the formal outline, several important conventions must be followed:

- Divisions must contain at least two parts. For example, every "I" must have a "II," every "A" must have a "B," and so on.
- The introduction and conclusion paragraphs are *generally* not included.
- The outline *generally* has 3-7 main ideas that correspond to the sections of the paper.
- The entries at equal levels of generality (e.g., "A" and "B") should be parallel. For example, if one entry begins with a noun, the other one should too.
- The first word of each entry is capitalized; all others (except for proper nouns) are lower case.
- A **Table of Contents** can be formed by adding page numbers for each outline entry.
- Note that Roman numerals for main sections of the paper are aligned by the periods.

The format and conventions on the previous page apply to all formal outlines. However, the formal outline entries differ depending on whether the formal outline is a **topic** outline or a **sentence** outline; the two are never mixed.

### Topic Outline

For a **topic outline**, *each level contains a phrase* that clearly summarizes the content of the section. The entries in topic outlines are *not* followed by periods.

*Thesis statement:* The way people eat is one of the factors that contributes to heart disease.

- I. Consumption of saturated and unsaturated fats
- II. Consumption of refined sugar
  - A. May cause inflammation in heart and arteries
  - B. Leads to vitamin B deficiencies
- III. Lack of fresh fruits and vegetables in diet
  - A. Contributes to vitamin C deficiency
  - B. Leads to inflammation and tearing in arterial walls
- IV. Mineral deficiencies
- V. Ingestion of caffeine
  - A. Raises blood pressure
  - B. Makes heart work harder
- VI. Good and bad cholesterol

### Sentence Outline

In contrast to topic outlines, **sentence outlines** require more thought and detail because *each entry is a complete sentence*. However, the benefit of sentence outlines is that the entries can often serve as topic sentences in paragraphs, which may help in writing the paper. Also, a sentence outline makes it easier for readers to assess the logic of your argument. Since all entries are complete sentences, they are followed by a period.

*Thesis Statement:* Because it fails to improve student learning, and creates, rather than solves, problems for schools, year-round education is a waste of precious time and money for educational institutions.

- I. The year-round education program has several key components.
  - A. A wide range of schedules are used in year-round education.
  - B. The concept of “tracks” is important to year-round education.
- II. The National Association for Year-Round Education is a key proponent of year-round education.
- III. Participation in year-round education is exaggerated.
- IV. Year-round education has not had a major impact on academic achievement in students.
  - A. Summer learning loss may not exist.
  - B. Test scores reveal no significant differences.
- V. Year-round education does not necessarily save districts money.
  - A. Saving money at the cost of quality education is a serious problem.
  - B. Existing costs of schools tend to increase with year-round education.
  - C. Implementing year-round education creates additional costs.
- VI. Overall, year-round education does not deliver the benefits it often promises.