

Outlining: Structuring a Paper

Outlining...

- Helps a writer group and arrange ideas.
- Helps a writer plan the development and organization of his or her paper.
- Helps a writer check for gaps in information.
- Helps as a tool to assist a writer at any time during the writing process.

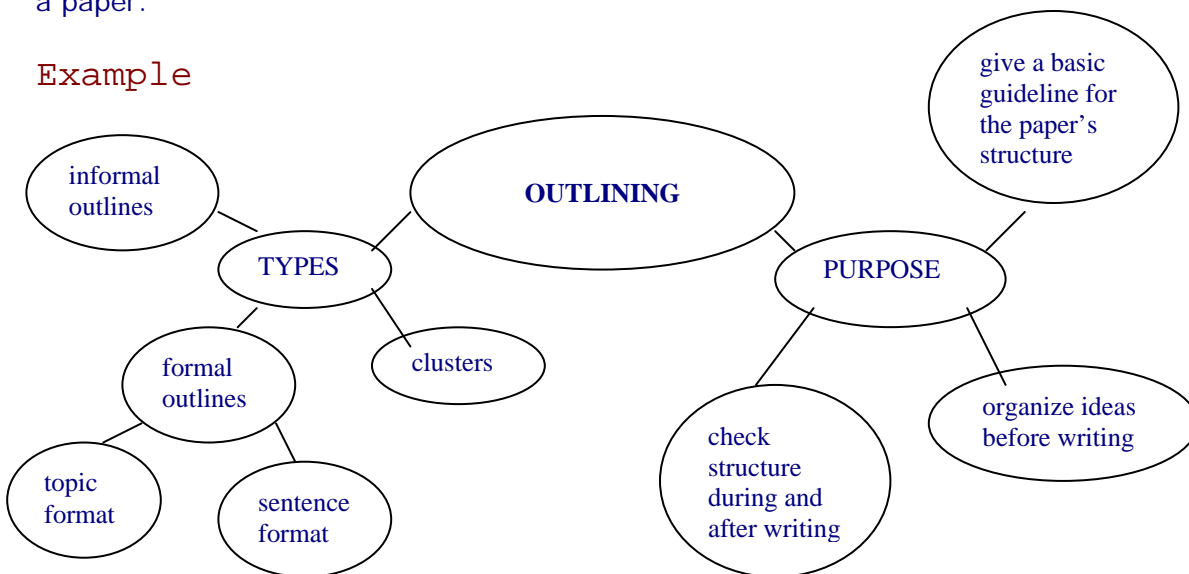
There are a few different ways to outline ideas, with each type of outline offering different amounts of flexibility: informal outlines, clusters, and formal outlines.

Informal Outlines are more flexible because they are less detailed and do not have a specific, required format. Informal outlines generally:

- Sort ideas relating to one overall topic into smaller groups, which are arranged in a possible order.
- List subordinate (supporting) ideas and details within these groups under their appropriate section, usually with no particular order.
- Include a rough draft thesis statement at the beginning.

Clusters are especially helpful for testing possible topics to see if there is enough information for an entire paper. They differ from outlines because they demonstrate the subdivisions and relationships between pieces of information, without delineating the possible order of presenting that information within a paper.

Example



Making a cluster is one way of putting information together in a chart that subdivides to show relationships between the different ideas. A cluster is repeatedly divided into subtopics and should go from most general at the top to more specific each time it branches off.

To make a cluster...

- a) Begin by grouping ideas in general categories, according to themes or patterns among the information you have collected or brainstormed.
- b) Then organize each category into subdivisions, placing it in the chart according to how specific or general each piece of information is in relation to the rest.

Formal outlines provide a more complete and defined plan of structure. They match the following format exactly.

Example

Thesis Statement: There are many different types of outlining, including informal outlines, clusters, and formal outlines, each of which can help a writer develop and check the structure of his or her paper at different stages in the writing process.

I. Informal Outlines

- A. Definition and description
 1. A grouped listing of brainstormed and/or researched information
 2. Shorter than a formal outline
 3. More loosely structured than a formal outline
- B. Purposes/Uses
 1. Groups ideas
 2. Arranges ideas into a preliminary pattern for a rough essay structure

II. Clusters

- A. Definition and description
 1. A diagram of ideas grouped according to their relationships
 2. Continually subdivides
 - a. Starts general at the top
 - b. Becomes more specific as it branches out towards the bottom
- B. Etc. ...

If there is one piece of information at a specific level, then there must be a second piece of information to go along with it. For example, if there is a I, there must be a II; if there is an A, there must be a B, and so on.

Applications of Outlines in Evaluating the Strength of a Paper's Structure – You can use an outline to make sure that the information in your paper matches your thesis statement. Remember, at any time in the writing process, it is okay to reorganize the structure of your paper, and of your outline. In fact, reorganizing your outline when you do make changes to your paper will help you make sure that the structure of your paper was not weakened by the change.

Gaps of Information – In clusters, this is determined by how balanced the branching is. If one area of the cluster branches off and becomes very specific, while another part barely branches out at all, then there is a gap of information. This same type of situation applies to informal and formal outlines. If one area has a lot more supporting details, or becomes much more specific than the other sections, then there is a gap of information. In these cases, either more research needs to be done, certain sections may need to be deleted or changed, or a new topic may need to be selected.