

Four Main Components for Effective Outlines

Ideally, you should follow these four suggestions to create an effective outline. The examples are taken from the Sample Outline handout.

Parallelism - How do I accomplish this?

Each heading and subheading should preserve parallel structure. If the first heading is a verb, the second heading should be a verb. Example:

- I. Choose Desired Colleges
- II. Prepare Application

("Choose" and "Prepare" are both verbs. The present tense of the verb is usually the preferred form for an outline)

Coordination - How do I accomplish this?

All the information contained in Heading 1 should have the same significance as the information contained in Heading 2. The same goes for the subheadings (which should be less significant than the headings). Example:

- A. Visit and evaluate college campuses
- B. Visit and evaluate college websites
 1. Look for interesting classes
 2. Note important statistics

(Campus and websites visits are equally significant. They are part of the main tasks you would need to do. Finding statistics and classes found on college websites are parts of the process involved in carrying out the main heading topics.)

Subordination - How do I accomplish this?

The information in the headings should be more general, while the information in the subheadings should be more specific. Example:

- a. Describe an influential person in your life
 - (1) favorite high school teacher
 - (2) grandparent

(A favorite teacher and grandparent are specific examples from the generalized category of influential people in your life.)

Division - How do I accomplish this?

Each heading, if divided, should be divided into 2 or more parts. Example:

- III. Compile resume
 - A. List relevant coursework
 - B. List work experience
 - C. List volunteer experience

(The heading "Compile resume" is divided into 3 parts.)

Alphanumeric Outlines

This is the most common type of outline and usually instantly recognizable to most people. The formatting follows these characters, in this order:

- Roman Numerals
- Capitalized Letters
- Arabic Numerals
- Lowercase Letters

If the outline needs to subdivide beyond these divisions, use Arabic numerals inside parentheses and then lowercase letters inside parentheses.

The sample below is an example of an outline that a student might create before writing an essay. In order to organize her thoughts and make sure that she has not forgotten any key points that she wants to address, she creates the outline as a framework for her essay.

Sample Alphanumeric Outline

The College Application Process

I. Choose Desired Colleges

- A. Visit and evaluate college campuses
- B. Visit and evaluate college websites
 - 1. look for interesting classes
 - 2. note important statistics
 - a. student/faculty ratio
 - b. retention rate

II. Prepare Application

- A. Write Personal Statement
 - 1. Choose interesting topic
 - a. describe an influential person in your life
 - (1) favorite high school teacher
 - (2) grandparent
 - b. describe the achievement you are most proud of
 - 2. Include important personal details
 - a. volunteer work
 - b. participation in varsity sports
- B. Revise personal statement

III. Compile resume

- A. List relevant coursework
- B. List work experience
- C. List volunteer experience
 - 1. tutor at foreign language summer camp
 - 2. counselor for suicide prevention hotline