

## Refining Outlining Skills

Success in outlining is a matter of understanding how ideas relate to one another. This is something that can be learned quickly and easily.

Authors of textbooks organize material in predictable patterns. Once those patterns are recognized, outlining becomes an easy way to organize notes. There are 6 basic patterns for presenting textbook or lecture information:

1. **CHRONOLOGICAL** – This pattern is **based on time** periods such as seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, etc. *Examples - “the next day.....”, “4 hours later.....”, “previously.....”, “over the next 3 years.....”*
2. **PROCESS OR SEQUENCE** – In this pattern, information is presented according to **stages, steps, or logical development** of an idea. These may be numbered or lettered to help you understand the progression. *Examples - “the first step.....”, “the next stage.....”, “finally”, “(1), 2), 3)”, etc.*
3. **CAUSE AND EFFECT** – **Something happens because something else happened** first. *Examples - “When this event took place, the impact was.....”, “The fallout from this was.....”*
4. **PROBLEM AND SOLUTION** – **A situation is presented and one or more alternatives for resolution** are identified, proposed, attempted, or demonstrated. *Examples - “The problem is how to distribute the wealth.....”, “Several proposals were made in the legislature.....”*
5. **INDUCTIVE** – This logical pattern goes from **general to specific**. A general statement is made and then details presented to explain or support it. *Example - “Sometimes, the hardest part of writing is seeing the different styles. There are 5 basic kinds of writing.”*
6. **DEDUCTIVE** – This logical pattern goes from **specific to general**. Specifics are presented and then a general statement is made from these. *Example - “The 5 kinds of exposition are classification, compare/contrast, definition, narrative, and process. Learning to write in these formats is sometimes difficult.”*
7. **COMPARE/CONTRAST** – This pattern focuses upon **similarities and/or differences when comparing and differences only when contrasting**.

The outline format accommodates these patterns and even incorporates them to help organize notes.

Outlining is an effective format for notes because:

- A. Main ideas are visually separated from other main ideas thus, more likely to be so in the memory.

- B. Main ideas are visibly separated from related details thus, more likely to be so in the memory.
- C. Notes are visually well organized thus, eliminating confusion and poor recall that comes from studying disorganized notes.
- D. Learning material for exams is easier and takes less time with well-organized notes.
- E. During exams, outlines of main ideas and related details can be jotted down and used as guides for writing essay answers.
- F. Outlining lends itself to self-testing where students can discover what has been learned and what has not yet been learned before an exam is taken when something can still be done about it.
- G. Lecture and textbook information can be condensed, abbreviated, and converted into one's own words to speed learning and reduce the total amount of material to be learned.
- H. Outlines show the relationship of main ideas to each other and how each main idea is related to its clarifying details.

## How to Outline

---

First, it is essential to recognize main ideas. In textbooks, they appear as titles, headings, sub-headings, bold print, in summaries, etc. Often, main ideas are contained in the first sentence of each paragraph. Explanations of main ideas usually follow immediately in the remaining paragraph(s). In lectures, main ideas are usually written on chalkboards, contained in handouts, or stated aloud.

### 3 rules for organizing outlined information

1. Roman numerals, letters, and different widths of indentation are used to indicate the relative importance of information to each other piece of information.
2. All ideas of equal importance have the same width of indentation, same size Roman numeral, letter, or number.
3. Main ideas and related information are recorded in short phrases, abbreviations, and symbols when possible. This keeps notes as short as possible while preserving understanding.

After main ideas are given in texts or lectures, related information is presented which helps clarify, explain or support each main idea. When studying, learning the details related to main ideas helps with understanding each main idea. One way to speed the learning of main ideas and related information in outlines involves the use of memory devices called mnemonics.

One type of mnemonic, a WORD MNEMONIC (an aid to remembering), may be made from the 1st letters of each item to be learned in the details. For example below, each type of detail authors use to clarify, explain or support main ideas is listed.

## 7 types of information contained in details that explain main ideas:

1. Incidents/examples
2. Diagrams/charts/graphs
3. Steps/processes
4. Traits/characteristics
5. Analogies/reasons/explanations
6. Logic/proof/research
7. Effects/causes

The 7 types of details related to important ideas can be rearranged so that the first letters form the word DETAILS. This is called a word mnemonic.

Look at the mnemonic below and see how much easier it is to remember the 7 different types of information related to main ideas using DETAILS instead of trying to remember the list above without any aid.

- **D**igrams/charts/graphs
- **E**ffects/causes
- **T**raits/characteristics
- **A**nalogies/reasons/explanations
- **I**ncidents/examples
- **L**ogic/proof/research
- **S**teps/stages/processes

When organizing material from textbooks or lectures, be alert for chances to make mnemonics from the material in outlines.

## Goals of Outlines

---

There are many effective ways to outline, but the ultimate goals of outlining are common to all of them.

### 5 Goals of Outlining

1. Visually separate main ideas from other main ideas
2. Visually separate a main idea from its details
3. Clearly show the relationship of main ideas to other main ideas
4. Clearly show the relationship of a main idea to its details
5. Clearly show the relationship of details to other details under the same main idea

To clearly identify and separate main ideas and details, the use of space is necessary. Below is an example of one way to construct an outline. Note the use of space to separate ideas vertically and horizontally according to importance.

## Example of a General Outline Format

---

### Major Topic

#### I. First main idea under the major topic

- A. 1st detail (DETAILS) related to main idea I.
- B. 2nd detail (DETAILS) related to main idea I.
  - 1. 1st detail (DETAILS) related to B.
  - 2. 2nd detail (DETAILS) related to B.
- C. 3rd detail (DETAILS) related to 1st main idea I.

#### II. Second main idea under the major topic

- A. 1st detail (DETAILS) related to main idea II.
- B. 2nd detail (DETAILS) related to main idea II.

#### III. Third main idea under the major topic

- A. 1st detail (DETAILS) related to main idea III.
- B. 2nd detail (DETAILS) related to main idea III.
  - 1. 1st detail (DETAILS) related to B.
  - 2. 2nd detail (DETAILS) related to B.
    - a. Important detail (DETAILS) related to 2.
    - b. Important detail (DETAILS) related to 2.

## Tips for Making Outlines

---

- \* In outlines, use main ideas given by authors or lecturers and designate them as such by using large roman numerals.
- \* Look for DETAILS under each main idea in textbooks and lectures. Identify DETAILS for each main idea with capital letters, numbers, and lower case letters depending on relationship to information immediately above.
- \* Use numbers, letters, and indentations to indicate relationships of one piece of information to another. Indented material should be directly related to the information immediately above it. For example:

Example of Information Markers	Information Markers
<p><b>Large Roman Numerals</b> = Main Ideas</p>	<p>I. II. III.</p>

Example of Information Markers	Information Markers
<b>Capital Letters</b> = DETAILS that clarify, explain or support main ideas in large roman numerals like <b>I., II., III.</b> , etc.	<b>A.</b> <b>B.</b> <b>C.</b>
<b>Numbers</b> = DETAILS that clarify, explain or support the ideas in capital letters like <b>A., B., C.</b> , etc.	<b>1.</b> <b>2.</b> <b>3.</b>
<b>Small Letters</b> = DETAILS that clarify, explain or support the ideas in numbers like <b>1., 2., 3.</b> , etc.	<b>a.</b> <b>b.</b> <b>c.</b>

## Outline Example

---

- The material included in the following example outline comes from the book HOW TO STUDY IN COLLEGE by Walter Pauk. The outline contains the main ideas and related details to help you see how well-outlined notes appear.

### READING METHODS

- I. Paragraph by paragraph method.
  - A. How to rd para by para.
    1. Usually 1 main idea per para.
    2. After rdng para - ask what author said & repeat aloud my understanding.
      - a. If right - read on.
      - b. If wrong - reread until I can correctly recite what author said.
      - c. If unable to recite information aloud correctly, I do not understand the para.
    3. Use topic sentences = help under. meaning of para. bcz main idea is in topic sentence.
  - B. Txbk troubleshooting - If matl. is vague.
    1. Go back few paras. for gist of ideas again.
    2. Rd. ahead to see where author is going.
    3. Look up unknown words.
    4. Rd. problem para. aloud exaggerating words = concentration.
    5. If still not getting it - use Corson Tech. = write out what don't under. & ask classmate or prof.

## Additional Tips

---

The skills for outlining are easily acquired and very effective for taking and organizing notes. As with anything worthwhile, fast and effective outlining takes some practice. A good time to practice is while taking notes from textbooks. When this is comfortable, use the outline format for taking lecture notes.

*Adapted from: Congos, Dennis H. (2011) Starting Out in Community College. Chicago, IL: McGraw-Hill*



Student Academic Resource Center



Don't get bogged down by letters, numbers, or indentations during lecture. *Until proficiency is attained, concentrate on getting as much of the information down on paper as possible.* It is true that you will master outlining skills sooner the more you practice, but the price is too high if you are so tenacious at forming a proper outline that you miss important lecture material. After lectures, notes can be recopied into neater outlines with a bonus of that action serving as a review. Recopying promotes learning and recall at exam time.

The main benefit of recopying notes is a clear, well-organized, easy-to-learn set of notes. You can also quickly self-test and **discover what is learned and what is not yet learned before you take an exam when you can still do something about it.**