

Outlining an Essay keys to Writing

Learning Objective:

Develop an outline for an essay.

LESSON

Using an **outline** is helpful when you are reading a textbook or an **essay** or taking notes in class. It is also helpful when you are the writer. Outlining is an excellent tool for planning and organizing your **content**. Different types of writing styles can use various outlining formats, but all outlines contain the same basic elements: **main idea**, **major supporting details**, and **minor supporting details**.

When writing an essay that uses examples from personal experience to support an **opinion**—sometimes called an **exemplification** essay—the outline should list the opinion (main idea), followed by the supporting details. Remember that if you are outlining a paragraph, the main idea is the topic sentence; whereas, in a longer passage the main idea is the **thesis statement**.

Main Idea

Major Supporting Detail

Minor Supporting Detail

Minor Supporting Detail

Major Supporting Detail

Minor Supporting Detail

Minor Supporting Detail

Major Supporting Detail

Minor Supporting Detail

Minor Supporting Detail

For example, if a writer was describing how his father influenced his musical career, he would use examples showing how that was true. One example might be that his father taught him how to play the guitar when he was young. Another example might be that his father took him to his first performance in front of a crowd. These examples would be supporting details and depending on how in-depth the essay was to be, there might also be minor supporting details for each of the examples.

- PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Writing is like building a house. It is ill-advised to just begin building one day without planning. In fact, most cities and towns require the home builder to submit blueprints

before the foundation is poured. This ensures that the house will be constructed solidly without a chance of falling down. It also allows the builder to save both time and money.

Likewise, outlines help writers develop solid research **papers**, business reports, and **cover letters**. It may seem unexpected, but taking the time to plan before you begin writing creates a foundation that will actually save you time overall because you will have a clear idea of what you will write. Planning allows you to spend less time in the **revision** process, which is a benefit whether you are writing for your college classes or your job.

- EXAMPLE

Here is an example of how a writer can create a **formal outline** or **informal outline** for the topic of an influential person. In the outlines below, the bolded items are the examples discussed earlier. These can be used as supporting details in one paragraph about the writer's father, or they can be separated into individual paragraphs as part of a longer essay. Also notice that the main idea will be either the topic sentence of a paragraph or the thesis of an essay.

Formal Outline:

Introduction	
Main Idea	
Supporting Paragraphs	Introduction
Point A	My father influenced my musical career.
Sub point	Supporting Paragraphs
Sub point	He taught me how to play the guitar.
Point B	He bought me my first guitar.
Sub point	He gave me lessons.
Sub point	He traveled to my first performances.
Point C	He attended concerts at school.
Sub point	He took me to local competitions.
Sub point	He encouraged me to form a band.
	He gave me space to practice.
	He had patience when we played poorly.

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Informal Outline:

I. Main Idea	I. My Father – An Influential Person
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- Supporting Idea
- Supporting Idea
- Supporting Idea

- Taught guitar
- Traveled to performances
- Encouraged forming a band

- YOUR TURN

Using the topic provided, create a sample formal and informal outline you could use to write an essay about that topic.

TOPIC: Best or Worst Job(s)

Use this template to create a formal outline.

Introduction

Main Idea

Supporting Paragraphs

Point A

Sub point

Sub point

Point B

Sub point

Sub point

Point C

Sub point

Sub point

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Sample Answer

Introduction

One of the reasons I'm going to college is that I've had horrible jobs.

Supporting Paragraphs

My first job was at Bob's Bait & Tackle.

I dug night crawlers.

I smelled like fish all day.

My second job was at Hot Dog Heaven.

I served hungry and mean people.

I smelled like hot dogs all day.

My third job was at Happy Kids Play Land

I cleaned up messes.

I smelled like play-dough all day.

Use this template to create an informal outline.

I. Main Idea

- Supporting Idea
- Supporting Idea
- Supporting Idea

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Sample Answer

I. Worst Jobs

- Bob's Bait and Tackle
- Hot Dog Heaven
- Happy Kids Play Land

- METACOGNITIVE QUESTIONS

How will outlines help you in your future writing assignments?

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Sample Answer

Creating an outline will help me think through the assignment more at the beginning of the writing process. In the end, I will have a much better essay because I planned it.

Which type of outline—formal or informal—do you prefer and why?

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Sample Answer

I was always taught to use the formal outline structure, and I still think that is a good way of planning to write because it makes me include more detail than I might otherwise. However, I also like the informal outline because sometimes thinking about creating a formal outline seems like a big task. If I just think about creating an informal outline, I may be less hesitant to make one.