Developing an Outline

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To review a sample outline, see the OWL document Sample Outline at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_outlinS.html. For more information about writing research papers at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/workshops/hypertext/ResearchW/index.html, see our overview page as well as our new, extensive research paper workshop. For general writing concerns at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/index.html, see our overview page on that topic. See the OWL document When You Start to Write for more help with the early stages of the writing process at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_plan2.html.

Developing an Outline

An outline is:

- A logical, general description
- A schematic summary
- An organizational pattern
- A visual and conceptual design of your writing

An outline reflects logical thinking and clear classification.

Purpose

General:

- Aids in the process of writing

Specific:

- Helps you organize your ideas
- Presents your material in a logical form
- Shows the relationships among ideas in your writing
- Constructs an ordered overview of your writing
- Defines boundaries and groups

Process

Before you begin:

- Determine the **purpose** of your paper.
- Determine the **audience** you are writing for.
- Develop the **thesis** of your paper.

Then:

- **Brainstorm**: List all the ideas that you want to include in your paper.
- **Organize**: Group related ideas together.
- **Order**: Arrange material in subsections from general to specific or from abstract to concrete.
- **Label**: Create main and sub headings.

Theory

An outline has a balanced structure based on the following principles:

- Parallelism
- Coordination
- Subordination
- Division

Parallelism

Whenever possible, in writing an outline, **coordinate heads** should be expressed in parallel form. That is, nouns should be made parallel with nouns, verb forms with verb forms, adjectives with adjectives, and so on (Example: Nouns: computers, programs, users; Verbs: to compute, to program, to use; Adjectives: home computers, new programs, experienced users). Although parallel structure is desired, logical and clear writing should not be sacrificed simply to

maintain parallelism. (For example, there are times when nouns and gerunds at the same level of an outline are acceptable.) Reasonableness and flexibility of form is preferred to rigidity.

Coordination

In outlining, those items which are of equal significance have comparable numeral or letter designations: an *A* is equal to a *B* , a *1* to a *2* , an *a* to a *b* , etc. Coordinates should be seen as having the same value. Coordination is a principle that enables a writer to maintain a coherent and consistent document.

Correct coordination

    A. Word processing programs
    B. Database programs
    C. Spreadsheet programs

Faulty coordination

    A. Word processing programs
    B. Microsoft Word
    C. Page Maker

Explanation : Word is a type of word processing program and should be treated as a subdivision. Page Maker is a type of desktop publishing program. One way to correct coordination would be:

    A. Types of programs
        1. Word processing
        2. Desktop publishing
    B. Evaluation of programs
        1. Word processing
        a. Word
        b. Word Perfect
        2. Desktop Publishing
        a. Page Maker
        b. Quark Express

Subordination

In order to indicate levels of significance, an outline uses major and minor headings. Thus in ordering ideas, you should organize it from general to specific or from abstract to concrete- the more general or abstract the term, the higher the level or rank in the outline. This principle allows your material to be ordered in terms of logic and requires a clear articulation of the relationship between component parts used in the outline. Subdivisions of each higher division should always have the same relationship to the whole.

Correct subordination

    A. Word processing programs
        1. Microsoft Word
        2. Word Perfect
    B. Desktop publishing programs
        1. PageMaker
        2. Quark Express

Faulty subordination

    A. Word processing programs
        1. Word
        2. Useful
        3. Obsolete

Explanation : There is an *A* without a *B* . Also 1, 2, and 3 are not equal; Word is a type of word processing program, and *useful* and *obsolete* are qualities. One way to correct this faulty subordination is:

    A. Word
        1. Positive features
        2. Negative features
    B. Word Perfect
        1. Positive features
        2. Negative features

Division

To divide you always need at least two parts; therefore, there can never be an *A* without a *B* , a *1* without a *2* , an *a* without a *b* , etc. Usually there is more than one way to divide parts; however, when dividing use only one basis of division at each rank, and make the basis of division as sharp as possible.

Correct division

    A. Personal computers: hardware
        1. Types
        2. Cost
        3. Maintenance

B. Personal computers: software

Faulty division

A. Computers
    1. Mainframe
    2. Micro
    a. Floppy disk
    b. Hard disk
B. Computer uses
    1. Institutional
    2. Personal

Form

The most important rule for outlining form is to be consistent!

An outline can use **topic** or **sentence** structure.

A **topic** outline uses words or phrases for all entries and uses no punctuation after entries.

Advantages: presents a brief overview of work and is generally easier and faster to write than a sentence outline.

A **sentence** outline uses complete sentences for all entries and uses correct punctuation.

Advantages: presents a more detailed overview of work including possible topic sentences and is easier and faster for writing the final paper.

An outline can use Roman numerals/letters or decimal form.

Roman Numeral

I.

    A.

    B.

        1.

        2.

            a.

            b.

Decimal

1.0

    1.1

    1.2

        1.2.1

        1.2.2

            1.2.2.1

            1.2.2.2

See OWL handout for a sample outline at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_outlinS.html.

The following information must remain intact on every handout printed for distribution.

This page is located at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/general/gl_outlin.html

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