



The Writing Center @ JSCC

Outlining

Outlines are important for brainstorming and organizing your essays and help you see if an idea fits better in one place than another or which ideas need to be expanded. Ideally, every main point will have equal numbers of supporting details to give the paper balance. Outlines make it simple to identify the main components of the paper, and they can be as detailed as your paper requires.

Usually, writers use outlines at the start of the writing process to develop ideas for a paper. They are especially important for timed writing to help writers prevent writer's block. If you're doing a timed writing assignment, be sure to spend a few minutes at the start of your timed session to organize with an outline.

Sometimes writers also use outlines after they've written an essay to revise the essay's organization. Once an outline is done on a finished essay, a writer can check to see whether all of the sentences, points, and paragraphs are where they fit best.

Below are two types of outlines: simple and complex. Try each at least once to see which works better for you.

- (A) Some outlines are **simple**, and you might use them if you prefer to see only the main points. Here's an example of a relatively simple outline:

Topic: Changing a name

Question: Why do people change their names?

Tentative thesis: People change their names because they have to or want to.

Points:

1. Forced change
2. Avoidance-based change
 - a. Discrimination
 - b. Fame
3. Marriage
4. Show business

- (B) Another student may prefer to see more details to make sure his/her points do not get off topic, so they may use a more **complex** outline:

Topic: Camping trip problems

Question: What problems can come up to ruin an outdoor camping trip?

Tentative thesis: Tent camping can be an extremely frustrating experience due to uncontrolled factors such as bad weather, wildlife encounters, and equipment failures.

Points:

- I. Introduction
 - A. About tent camping and other types of camping (several sentences) (cont'd)

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- B. Tent camping can be an extremely frustrating experience due to uncontrolled factors such as bad weather, wildlife encounters, and equipment failures. (**Tentative thesis**)
- II. First point – Bad weather (Need a **Topic sentence**)
 - A. First supporting detail – Setting up camp in the rain can be wet and muddy.
 - B. Second supporting detail – Rain and cold can delay outdoor activities.
 - C. Third supporting detail – Tents can blow down in heavy rain or wind.
- III. Second point – Wildlife (Need a **Topic sentence**)
 - A. First supporting detail – Mosquitoes and ants are annoying.
 - B. Second supporting detail – Snakes can be dangerous.
 - C. Third supporting detail – Run-ins are sometimes inevitable.
- IV. Third point – Equipment failures (Need a **Topic sentence**)
 - A. First supporting detail – Tents fall down.
 - B. Second supporting detail – Sleeping bag zippers get caught.
 - C. Third supporting detail – Sleeping bags touch tent sides and get wet.
- V. Conclusion – Restate points; end with encouragement

Now, let's say that the complex outline is from a paper that's not so well organized. See how

- I. Introduction
 - A. About tent camping and other types of camping (several sentences)
 - B. Tent camping can be an extremely frustrating experience due to uncontrolled factors such as bad weather, wildlife encounters, and equipment failures.
- II. First point – Bad weather
 - A. First supporting detail – Setting up camp in the rain can be wet and muddy.
 - B. Second supporting detail – Snakes come into tents in rainy weather. (**Fits into wildlife section better.**)
 - C. Third supporting detail – Clear skies are best for camping trips. (**Not about bad weather, but good weather. Need to replace with bad weather example.**)
- III. Second point – Wildlife
 - A. First supporting detail – Mosquitoes and ants are annoying.
 - B. Second supporting detail – Snakes can be dangerous.
 - C. Third supporting detail – Run-ins are sometimes inevitable.
- IV. Third point – Equipment failures
 - A. First supporting detail – Keep food covered to prevent attracting bears. (**Fits better in wildlife section.**)
 - B. Second supporting detail – Sleeping bag zippers get caught.
 - C. Third supporting detail – Tents can fall down.
- V. Conclusion – Restate points; end with encouragement

Notice that the author could revise his/her paper easily from the outline to ensure better organization for the final draft.