

Developing a Topic Outline

An outline shows at a glance the order, relationship, and relative importance of the ideas and details you will use to develop your paper.

Two formal outline forms are acceptable for MLA format: Harvard or Decimal. Often a sentence outline is required, but for your paper, a TOPIC OUTLINE will be fine.

When you prepare a topic outline for your paper, observe these rules:

1. Place the TITLE of your paper and your THESIS SENTENCE, lifted from your paper, on the page above the outline. These items are not numbered items.
2. Do not use the terms *introduction*, *body*, and *conclusion* in the outline. These are not topics to be discussed and therefore have no place in a topic outline.
3. In HARVARD FORM, number main topics with **Roman numerals**; letter the subtopics under each main topic with capital letters. Divisions of subtopics, in descending order of importance, are given numbers and letters as follows: Arabic numerals, small letters, Arabic numerals in parentheses, small letters in parentheses. In DECIMAL FORM whole and decimal numbers designate all topics and subtopics. I would suggest you use the Harvard form for you paper. It is less confusing.
4. Indent subtopics so that all corresponding letters or numbers are in a vertical line.

Correct Harvard Form

- I. Main topic
 - A. Subtopic of I
 - B. Subtopic of I
 - 1. Subtopic of B
 - 2. Subtopic of B
 - a. Subtopic of 2
 - b. Subtopic of 2
 - (1) Subtopic of b
 - (2) Subtopic of b
 - II. Main Topic
 - A .
 - B .
- etc.

5. Never allow a subtopic to stand alone. Since subtopics are *divisions* of the topic above them, you must have two or more subtopics or none at all.

6. Begin each topic and subtopic with a capital letter; otherwise, capitalize only proper nouns and adjectives. In a topic outline, do not follow topics with a period.
7. Since this is a topic outline, you must not use questions or complete sentences.
8. Use **PARALLEL FORM** for each main topic and for each group of subtopics. For example, if the first main topic is a noun, the other main topics must also be nouns; if the first subtopic under a main topic is an adjective, the corresponding subtopics must also be adjectives.

In the following example, the main topics and subtopics are **not** parallel in form.

- I. There are two kinds of science. (sentence)
 - A. Working in pure science (gerund phrase)
 - B. Applied science {noun and modifier}
- II. Personality (noun)
 - A. A good scholar (noun and modifiers)
 1. General aptitude (noun and modifier)
 2. Has special skills (verb, noun, and modifier)
 - B. Curiosity (noun)
 - C. Enthusiastic (adjective)

Now study the first two sections in the following complete outline. Notice that main topics I and II have been rewritten as nouns with modifiers and are parallel in form with main topic III. Each group of subtopics consists of a single noun or a noun and modifier.

- I. Basic types of science careers
 - A. Pure science
 - B. Applied science
- II. Personal characteristics of the science student
 - A. Scholarship
 1. General aptitude
 2. Special skills
 - B. Curiosity
 - C. Enthusiasm
- III. Academic training of the science student
 - A. High school courses
 - B. College courses
 - C. Extracurricular activities

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Yes, I really want you to do this. Every year, I think my students know how to do this, but they mess it up. This is your practice. Find a sheet of notebook paper, and write this sample outline in the correct form.

NOW DO THIS FOR PRACTICE: Refer to the rules on the handout as you revise the following outline.

Title: Learning to Live with Nature

Thesis Statement: Understanding natural disasters can help us to prepare for and to survive them.

- I. Introduction: Natural forces often cause great destruction
- II. Nature against people
 - A. Earthquakes
 - B. Volcanoes
 - C. Storms
 1. The violent storms called hurricanes
 2. Tornadoes
 - D. The damage caused by floods
 - E. Erosion is a natural force.
 - F. Droughts
 - G. other Natural Forces
 1. Forest fires
- III. What can people do and what have they done?
 - A. Taming the Floods
 - B. Protecting the soil
 1. Conservation
 - C. Saving the forests: How people fight forest fires
 - D. Preparedness: Guarding against drought
- IV. Working with Nature
- V. Conclusion: People can learn to live with nature