



Outlines

An outline can be a useful tool for planning a paper or a presentation. Writers use both informal and formal outlines to generate, manage, and sequence ideas.

Getting Started

Read the instructor's assignment prompt to make sure you understand all requirements. Then draft a working thesis before you begin to outline. Remember you can modify a working thesis.

Informal Outline

An informal outline is a paper plan that briefly lists your key supporting points and evidence for each point. Begin the process by brainstorming a general list using words and phrases. List the ideas and supporting points as they come to mind. An example for a paper on the Electoral College follows.

- Choosing electors—how process began
- Protection against “tyranny of the majority”
- Winner-take-all: minority not represented
- Four times president did not win popular vote
- Swing states v. safe states
- Faithless electors could go rogue
- Promotes compromise and prevents splinter parties
- Prevents “regional” lopsidedness
- Gallup poll: 63% favored abolishing EC (2013)

Look for relationships between the ideas. Should some ideas be grouped together? Do some support others? How might you create a logical order? Next, combine your working thesis statement with an informal outline—an attempt to group the ideas above into an informal plan for your paper.

Thesis: The Electoral College system, an unfair and outdated approach to electing a U.S. president, should be abolished and replaced with the popular vote.

History of Electoral College

- Protection against “tyranny of the majority”
- Electors allocated based on senators and reps

Disadvantages

- Unfairly weighted: minority not represented
- Candidates only campaign in “swing states”
- Faithless electors could “go rogue”
- President has won without popular vote (four times)
- Gallup poll: 63% favor abolishing EC (2013)

Advantages

- Prevents splinter parties & promotes consensus
- Prevents lopsided election based on regional majorities

The student has grouped together advantages and disadvantages of the Electoral College system. She has a good working plan to begin writing. After the first draft, the writer may find she needs to alter

sequence, add another source, or adjust the thesis. The purpose of the informal outline is to create a working plan to get the paper started.

Formal Outline

For some papers and presentations, you will need to create a formal outline. Formal outlines are especially useful when planning long research papers. The formal outline also begins with a thesis statement. The formal outline has multiple levels of heading (I, II; A, B; 1, 2, etc.), and at each level you write complete (formal) statements.

Thesis statement

- I. First Point
 - A. Supporting Evidence
 - 1. Example of Evidence
 - 2. Example of Evidence
 - B. Supporting Evidence
- II. Second Point
 - A. Supporting Evidence
 - 1. Example of Evidence
 - 2. Example of Evidence
 - B. Supporting Evidence . . . etc.

The following example is based on the Electoral College topic used above.

Thesis: The Electoral College system, an unfair and outdated approach to electing a U.S. president, should be abolished and replaced with the popular vote.

- I. The Electoral College is a federalist system developed by the U.S. founding fathers.
 - A. Madison and Hamilton argued that the “tyranny of the majority” ruined democracies.
 - 1. These political philosophers argued for a check against popular will.
 - 2. Their motivating concern was protection of property.
 - B. Electors were allocated based on senators and representatives.
 - 1. Each state got two electors per senator and one for every congressman.
 - 2. Small states were “protected” from oppression by larger ones.

The writer continues the formal outlining pattern above for the entire paper. In addition to helping provide a plan for drafting, the formal outlining process also helps to identify any areas where additional evidence and support or additional research is needed.

Reverse Outline

Some writers prefer to write a first draft without outlining. Many students who forego outlining write a first draft that has good ideas but lacks organization and development. Reverse outlining is a step performed after the first draft to aid in planning.

Read the draft and beside each paragraph, write a brief description of the main idea and evidence. If you find more than one main idea in the paragraph, record both (or all). When you complete the process, you will have an informal outline. Review the outline to see where you need to reorganize, add supporting points and evidence, or combine main points. Many writers use reverse outlining as a planning tool for revision.

Works Consulted

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