



## Constructing an Outline

### What is an outline?

An outline represents a presentation, either written or spoken, reduced to a blueprint or schematic. In other words, an outline is a skeletal form of thinking on a page. Its organization is quite logical and meaningful. Essentially, outlines operate under four structural principles:

- **Parallelism:** All items in the outline need to correspond to or mirror each other in terms of length and structure
- **Subordination:** Major ideas are placed prominently, while less significant ideas are placed below, properly indented
- **Division:** General or comprehensive ideas are broken down into localized, specific chunks or items
- **Coordination:** All sections of an outline need to work together to reproduce some movement of thought.

### Why use an outline?

An outline may be used at any stage of the drafting process. For example, you could use an outline to structure your thoughts prior to writing a paper (especially so when the paper is complex, as research papers often are, or when you are writing under pressure, as in an in-class essay). An outline may also be used to focus a draft. In other words, you might try to reduce your paper to an outline so that you may see the movement of your thinking in a clear way. Outlines may of course be used as a record of your reading and listening as well (reducing a textbook's chapter into subheadings, for example, or rendering a lecture into brief, but meaningful, chunks of information).

### What does an outline look like? What kinds are there?

Outlines are organized principally through the use of Roman numerals, capital and lower case letters and Arabic numbers. Outlines usually come in two forms: a topic outline or a sentence outline. A topic outline (used often when there is little time to compose) often lacks the detail of a sentence outline, which is typically extensive and substantive. Here are examples:

#### **Sentence Outline** (A Comparison of Two Characters in Alice Walker's story "Everyday Use")

- I. Dee values the past as a fashion statement.
  - A. She has pride in her family's heritage.
  - B. But she does not see the usefulness of the past other than as a showpiece.
- II. Maggie embodies the past.
  - A. Less attractive than her sister, Maggie seems to have little going for her.
  - B. Yet, in her quilt-making ability and in her appreciation of the quilt's uses, Maggie has a closer link to her family's heritage and a selflessness worth rewarding.

#### **Topic Outline** (Same Topic)

- I. Dee
  - A. Beautiful and confident
  - B. Selfish and living in the present
- II. Maggie
  - A. Plain in appearance and shy
  - B. Aware of family's heritage