



## How to Write an Outline

Martyn Shuttleworth 202.8K reads

For any research paper, it is essential to understand how to write an outline. In many fields, research papers require an outline, as an integral part of the paper.

Here are a few research paper outline examples.

Even if this is not the case, for longer papers, a good outline helps you to keep track of your ideas, acting as a road map for a perfect paper.

An outline is a great aid when you are trying to amalgamate and assess the research paper, because it allows you to see certain links between different areas, whilst making sure that you do not repeat yourself.

For a short paper, of a couple of thousand words or less, an outline might not be necessary. For a longer paper, it is essential, or you will become overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information that you need to assimilate, and write down.

Trying to write a 10 000-word dissertation, without an outline, is an exercise in futility.

Some subjects, typically those using MLA format, demand that you write an outline at the beginning of the paper.

Others, whilst not requiring an outline, do ask for a table of contents for longer papers, and an outline makes this process much easier. It allows you to be organized and lay out your headings properly, allowing the word processor's automatic table of contents tool to do its work.

For long papers, there is no harm in showing your outline to your supervisor early on in the process, because they will be able to tell you whether you are going in the right direction.

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## MLA Recommendations On How to Write an Outline

The easiest way to design an outline is with the MLA standard format <sup>[1]</sup>, which helps you to develop a good structure for the outline.

Major headings, such as 'Introduction <sup>[2]</sup>', 'Method <sup>[3]</sup>', etc. are given upper-case roman numerals, I, II...etc.

These sections are further subdivided, using A, B as a second level, 1, 2 as a third and a, b and i, ii make up the rest. Obviously, for a short or straightforward paper, you may not need all of these subheadings.

Your first outline is a working outline, so do not worry too much about going into detail, or getting everything in exactly the right order.

The initial outline allows you to structure your thoughts and establish how you are going to lay out the paper. For example, in the literature review <sup>[4]</sup> part of your paper, the outline will help you to decide whether to lay it out in a purely chronological order, or address each relevant point individually.

Whichever layout you use, it will help you to integrate the previous research and provide a more detailed analysis.

## How to Write an Outline - A Few Tips

- If you are using Word, or OpenOffice, make sure that the various levels of your outline (I, A, 1, a, i) correspond to the headings in the Word Processing program - Heading 1, Heading 2, Heading 3, etc. This will make it much easier to create a table of contents <sup>[5]</sup> based upon your outline <sup>[6]</sup>, at a later date.
- You will modify and adjust your outline as you go along, but make sure that you keep copies of older versions. You may find that you have taken the paper in a direction that you are not happy with, so can always go back.
- Whilst MLA format <sup>[1]</sup> is regarded as the best guide to how to write an outline, check

things over with your supervisor as they may have their own preferred ideas about how to write an outline, and it is much easier to get it right from the start rather than have to change everything retrospectively.

If you follow these instructions to write an outline, then you are a long way towards laying out the parts of a research paper <sup>[7]</sup> correctly.

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#### **Links**

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