

HOW TO WRITE AN OUTLINE

Lesson Objective

In this lesson, you will practice outlining. This is the pre-writing step that comes after brainstorming. After you learn the basics, you'll work on your own systematic plan for an informal and a formal piece of writing.

Did you know...

The idiom "play something by ear" means to NOT make a formal plan. When you play something by ear, you deal with problems, events, or plans as they arise.

LUCY: What time do you want to meet for dinner tonight?

LUKE: I don't know. Let's just play it by ear.

Writing Warm-Up

Get a blank piece of paper and freewrite for five minutes on one of the following topics. Write about the one that best describes your personality. Then discuss questions 1-3 with your classmates.

- a. I am a planner. I like to plan out everything from my vacations to my work day to my home life.
- b. I am spontaneous. I don't like to plan everything ahead of time. I like to see where life takes me.

1. Which topic did you write about, and why?
2. What benefits are there to planning vacations vs. being spontaneous when you're traveling?
3. Are there any disadvantages to being a "planner"?

Vocabulary Preview

Match these words to their correct definitions.

- | | |
|-----------------------|---|
| _____ 1. outline | a) a dot or other symbol that separates an item in an unnumbered list |
| _____ 2. spontaneous | b) a systematic plan for a piece of writing |
| _____ 3. bullet | c) without set plans |
| _____ 4. thesis | d) containing letters and numbers |
| _____ 5. body | e) the main point you want to prove or explore in a piece of writing |
| _____ 6. informal | f) the section of a written piece that contains most of the information |
| _____ 7. alphanumeric | g) to separate into smaller parts |
| _____ 8. subdivide | h) factual writing that explains or describes something (non-fiction) |
| _____ 9. first draft | i) the first rough copy of a piece of writing |
| _____ 10. expository | j) unofficial, casual |

Types of Outlines

No matter what kind of writing you are doing, it is a good idea to have a plan. Your writing will be easier for the reader to follow if you plan it out. Coming up with a lot of good ideas (brainstorming) is the first step. Organizing your ideas in short form (outlining) is the next step.

1. Informal Outlines

Short pieces of writing require a different style of outline than a research paper or essay. An informal outline is also called a “working outline”. It can be a simple list of things you want to include in your writing, as well as a few notes to yourself.

STORY

If you’re writing a story, your outline may include short-form notes or bullets about the following:

Title: _____

Setting

- _____
- _____

Main Characters

- _____
- _____
- _____

Plot

- _____
- _____
- _____

Conflict

- _____
- _____

Conclusion

- _____

BUSINESS LETTER

If you’re writing a short business letter, it may include the main points you want to make as well as any details that will make it easier for you to write (e.g., the exact spelling of the recipient and his or her business title). Here is an example of an informal outline for a business letter:

My Cover Letter Outline

Recipient: Melissa McKinnon,
Human Resources Manager

- Introduce myself
- Explain the position
I am applying for (researcher)
- Note that my resume is attached.
(Don’t forget to attach it!)
- Thank Melissa for her time.
- Provide contact info for easy access.
(Include cell and home number.)

TASK 1

Get a blank piece of paper, and create an informal outline using one of the following topics:

1. **Business letter:** Write an informal outline for a letter that you want to write to your travel agent about an upcoming trip.
2. **Story:** Write an informal outline for a story or book that you recently read. Pretend you are the author.

Types of Outlines, continued

2. Formal Outlines

If you're writing an essay or research paper, you'll need a more detailed outline. There are many types of essays and papers that you may be asked to write. For example: descriptive, argumentative, persuasive, compare and contrast, cause and effect, question and answer, narrative (tell a personal story), or sequential.

ALPHANUMERIC TEMPLATE

An alphanumeric outline is an outline that is organized with a system of letters (uppercase and lowercase) and numbers (this may include Roman numerals such as I, II, III, IV). For most types of essays and papers, you can think of your writing in three parts:

- Introduction
- Body
- Conclusion

There are a variety of ways to subdivide your ideas. Each section in your paper or essay may not have the same number of supporting details or examples. You may choose to write your outline in short form points (page 3) or in full sentences (page 4). Each teacher may have special requirements for your outline style. Here is a basic template you can use for a traditional five-paragraph essay or paper.

Title of Essay/Paper: _____

Thesis: _____

I. Introduction:

- A. Introduction of main topic in interesting way
- B. Main structure of writing (compare/contrast, personal opinion, research, etc.)
- C. Summarizing sentence (thesis)

III. Body (*Statement/Question 2*):

1. _____
a. _____
b. _____
2. _____
a. _____
b. _____
3. _____
a. _____
b. _____

V. Conclusion:

- A. Restate the thesis in a fresh way.
- B. Leave the reader thinking. Include a question or challenge.

II. Body (*Statement/Question 1*):

1. _____
a. _____
b. _____
2. _____
a. _____
b. _____
3. _____
a. _____
b. _____

IV. Body (*Statement/Question 3*):

1. _____
a. _____
b. _____
2. _____
a. _____
b. _____
3. _____
a. _____
b. _____

A Sample Outline (SHORT FORM)

Title of Essay/Paper: Springtime in the Big Apple

Thesis: The best time of year to visit New York City is spring.

I. Introduction:

- A. Georgia O'Keefe quote
- B. Compare NYC in seasons: Cost, Comfort, To-Dos
- C. Thesis: The best time of year to visit NYC is spring.

II. (Body) Cost:

1. Transportation
 - a. flight cheaper
 - b. walk or bike
2. Accommodations
 - a. hotel deals
3. Food & Entertainment
 - a. cheaper shows than holiday time
 - b. free street entertainment, cheaper food

III. (Body) Comfort:

1. Weather
 - a. mild, not cold or hot (can be rainy—umbrella)
 - b. lineups are shorter than winter & holidays
 - c. garbage smell is bad in summer
2. Fewer Crowds
 - a. shops aren't as busy because people are outside
 - b. museums
3. Walking
 - a. explore on foot (best way to see NYC)
 - b. take breaks at patios (people-watching)

IV. (Body) Sights:

1. Festivals
 - a. food markets open
 - b. film festival
2. In bloom
 - a. trees
 - b. flowers
3. Central Park
 - a. picnics
 - b. family

V. Conclusion:

- A. See NYC in all seasons.
- B. Spring is best.

TASK 2

Create your own formal outline for a similar piece of writing about a place that you have traveled to. If you haven't already brainstormed on this topic in a previous lesson, take some time to generate some ideas.

A Sample Outline (FULL SENTENCES)

Title of Essay/Paper: Springtime in the Big Apple

Thesis: The best time of year to visit New York City is spring.

I. New York is one of the best cities in the world to visit.

- A. "One can't paint New York as it is, but rather as it's felt." —Georgia O'Keefe
- B. This paper will weigh the pros and cons of traveling to New York in different seasons, taking into account cost, comfort, and sights to see.
- C. The best time of year to visit New York City is spring.

II. Spring is an affordable time to visit New York City.

- 1. Transportation to and around NYC is reasonable in springtime.
 - a. Flights are cheaper after the Christmas holidays. (Avoid spring break week/Presidents' Day.)
 - b. You can walk or bike around the city to save money.
- 2. Accommodations are more affordable off-season.
 - a. You can find hotel deals after the Christmas holidays.
- 3. It's possible to find discount entertainment tickets in the springtime.
 - a. Broadway shows are cheaper in March than December.
 - b. There is plenty of free street entertainment in NYC in springtime.

III. Spring is the most comfortable time to tour around NYC.

- 1. The weather in New York City is comfortable in the spring.
 - a. The temperatures are usually mild. It may be rainy, but not cold or hot.
 - b. The lineups aren't as long in the springtime
 - c. You don't get the garbage smell that you do in the summer.

- 2. There aren't as many indoor crowds in the springtime.
 - a. People move outdoors, so indoor sites are less crowded.
- 3. One of the most interesting things to do in NYC is walk.
 - a. In springtime you can explore all of Manhattan on foot.
 - b. Spring is an ideal time to walk across the bridges.

IV. There are many things to see and do in the spring.

- 1. In the spring you'll stumble across festivals wherever you walk.
 - a. Spring is when the outdoor food markets open.
 - b. There is a great film festival in the spring.
- 2. The city of New York comes to life in the spring.
 - a. The trees begin to blossom or have leaves.
- 3. Central Park is one of the greatest attractions in NYC (18 playgrounds).
 - a. Spring is a great time for picnics and tours of Central Park.
 - b. If you're bringing your family you'll find plenty to do in Central Park (keeps you out of toy stores).

V. Conclusion:

- A. New York should be experienced in all seasons.
- B. *"The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and beauty in the world."* —F. Scott Fitzgerald (The first time is usually the best, so make it springtime if you're going to NYC.)
Are you ready to book your trip?

TASK 3

Use a blank piece of paper to rewrite Task 2 (page 4) in complete sentences.

Analyze Your Outline

After you write your outline, look over each section to make sure you're ready to begin your first draft. Look for details or examples that are too general. Did you include a lot of details that might be considered common knowledge? Do any of your points need more evidence?

Even if you are working on an expository piece of writing, you still need to think about what point of view you will write from. Will your writing be in first-person (from your own perspective using "I") or in third-person (common in fact-based writing)?

Comprehension Check-In

Work with a partner and answer the following questions based on the lesson so far.

1. What does "play something by ear" mean? Share examples of when you have done this in your own life.
2. Why might you only need an informal outline rather than a formal outline?
3. What appears a few times in a formal outline? Why do you think it is important to include it more than one time?
4. In a traditional five-paragraph essay, what do you call paragraphs 2-4?
5. Can you spot any weak points in the short-form version of the sample outline?
6. What's the difference between the two sample outlines? Which style do you prefer, and why?
7. What is expository writing?
8. What is the next writing step after completing and analyzing an outline?

BEFORE STARTING YOUR FIRST DRAFT (ROUGH COPY) - A CHECKLIST

- Have I decided on how I will present my information (cause and effect, compare and contrast, etc.)?
- Did I include a specific topic?
- Did I provide a thesis or summarizing statement?
- Did I introduce my main ideas?
- Did I cover what I will include in each body paragraph?
- Did I note examples and supporting evidence for my main points?
- Did I outline my plans for a conclusion?
- Did I address any holes or weak areas in my argument or information?
- Have I thought about which perspective I will write from?

Writing Challenge

PLOTTER OR PANTSER

Many fiction writers describe themselves as either a "plotter" or a "pantser". Do a little research to find out what a "pantser" is. Who will be the first person in your class to discover the hidden idiom in this word?

When you figure out what a pantser is, look up your favorite fiction writer and try to figure out which type of writer he or she is.

Teachers' Answer Key

NOTE:

We recommend using ESL Library's *How to Brainstorm* lesson before this *How to Write an Outline* lesson. Some of the writing your students do in the brainstorming lesson can be used again in this lesson. This is a suggestion, not a prerequisite.

LESSON DESCRIPTION:

In this lesson, students learn the pre-writing technique that comes after brainstorming. Students view some sample outlines and practice writing outlines from a template.

LEVEL: Intermediate – Advanced

TAGS: writing, brainstorming, pre-writing, outline

Lesson Objective

Review the lesson objective with your students. Discuss the difference between formal and informal. You may want to talk about different uses for the word, such as formal wear/attire as well as formal writing.

Writing Warm-Up

Give your students some time to do a bit of writing on one of the topics provided. Remind them that this is freewriting. They will not have to show anyone the content. Discuss the follow-up questions in pairs or as a class.

Vocabulary Preview

Print copies of page 8 and cut out the strips, or have students do the matching exercise provided on page 1.

- | | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|-------|
| 1. b | 3. a | 5. f | 7. d | 9. i |
| 2. c | 4. e | 6. j | 8. g | 10. h |

Types of Outlines, Sample Outlines

Review the types of outlines and assign the tasks. You can decide if you want to assign all three writing tasks in class. You may want to assign Task 3 for homework (or you may decide not to assign this task if time does not permit). You can use the samples provided, or bring in your own samples.

Analyze Your Outline

Go through the checklist with your students. Have them look at their written version of Task 2 or 3 as they work through the checklist.

Comprehension Check-In

- The expression “play something by ear” means “Don’t plan something out. Wait and see what happens.”
- You may only need an informal outline if you’re writing a short piece or a story.
- The “thesis” appears a few times. It’s very important that you have a strong thesis before writing your first draft. (Tell students that readers should never have to ask “So what?” after reading an essay or paper.)
- In a traditional five-paragraph essay, you call paragraphs 2–4 “the body”.
- Answers will vary.
- The difference between the two sample outlines is that one includes short-form points and the other has full sentences.
- Expository writing is fact-based writing that explains or describes something (non-fiction).
- The next writing step after completing and analyzing an outline is to write a first draft (rough copy).

Writing Challenge

A pantsier is a writer who “flies by the seat of their pants” (does something without a plan). Challenge your students to read or watch interviews to find out what type of writer their favorite author is. The author can be a writer in any language.

SPELLING NOTES:

This lesson shows the American spelling of the words *Traveling*, *Traveled*, *Favorite*, and *Practice*. Most other English-speaking countries spell these words this way: *Travelling*, *Travelled*, *Favourite*, and *Practise* (when used as a verb, *Practice* when used as a noun). Also note that *Resume* can be spelled *Résumé*, with the French accents. Make it a challenge for your students to find these words in the lesson and see if they know the alternate spellings.

Extra Vocabulary Practice (Optional)

Write definitions in your own words. Cut up these vocabulary strips.
Challenge a partner to match the vocabulary to your definition.

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| outline | |
| spontaneous | |
| bullet | |
| thesis | |
| body | |
| informal | |
| alphanumeric | |
| subdivide | |
| first draft | |
| expository | |