

What Is A Good Sentence Outline?

Thesis: In order to help both the writer and the reader easily understand the structure of a paper, a good sentence outline must clearly indicate the structure of the paper and relate the major ideas of the structure to the thesis.

- I. A good outline of any kind clearly indicates the structure of the paper.
 - A. Any outline shows, by systematic arrangement, the order of ideas presented in the paper.
 1. Placing one topic under a more general one shows that it is subordinate.
 - a. The subordinate item should be less important.
 - b. The subordinate item should be a logical part of the general topic under which it is listed.
 2. Assigning two or more items the same kind of heading shows that they are equal in importance.
 3. Placing one item after another shows that the second reasonably follows from the first.
 - a. The order of the items may be dictated by the logic of the subject matter itself.
 - b. The order may simply help the reader understand the development.
 - B. A sentence outline shows most precisely the ideas and their relationships.
 1. Every single item must be a complete sentence.
 2. Each sentence should state a single idea.
 3. Each sentence should make a concrete assertion about the subject matter of the paper.
 - a. The sentences should not be empty abstractions.
 - b. The sentences should not merely state the author's plan.

c. The sentences should not be questions.

II. Outlines help both the writer and the reader grasp the subject as a whole.

- A. The outline requires the writer to organize his material effectively.
- B. The outline provides the reader with a handy table of contents.
- C. The outline shows at a glance the unity and organization of the paper.

III. An outline's parts should be organically related.

- A. The title should clearly indicate the subject and scope of the paper.
- B. The thesis should summarize the conclusions of the whole paper.
 - 1. It should be terse but meaningful.
 - 2. It should focus on the subject, not the writer.
 - 3. It should account for every major part of the paper.
- C. The body of the outline should develop the thesis completely.
 - 1. Any idea suggested in the thesis should be represented in the outline.
 - 2. Any idea in the outline should be appropriate to the thesis.

IV. An outline should strike a balance between general conclusions and specific details.

- A. An outline should be informative but readily grasped.
 - 1. It should be elaborate enough to show the major parts of the paper and their relationship.
 - 2. It should be brief enough to be taken in at a glance.
- B. A junior theme outline should be brief but informative. (Note: Your teacher may have different guidelines for this section.)
 - 1. It should contain at least one sentence for each major paragraph of the paper. (If the paper is ten pages long, and if you get one-and-a-half paragraphs to the page, the outline should contain at least fifteen sentences.)

2. It should contain sentences that are suited to be topic sentences of the paragraphs of the paper. (This does not necessarily mean that all items must be topic sentences.)

3. It should be one or two pages long -- rarely more or less.

V. The outline should be made clear by adhering to the conventional forms.

A. The divisions should be few but useful.

1. One topic can never be divided into fewer than two sub-topics. If you have an A, you must have a B; if a 1, also a 2; etc.

2. Major topics (Roman numerals) should not be fewer than three or more than six.

B. All entries should be terse, self-contained, and informative.

1. Each entry should be a grammatically complete sentence -- do not use "Introduction," "Body," and "Conclusion."

2. Sentences should be grammatically simple or complex, but not compound.

3. Sentences should not require reference to the title, thesis, or other sentences distant from them in the outline; they should be clear in themselves.

4. Sentences stating parallel ideas should be grammatically parallel.

C. Mechanics should be uniform and correct.

1. Roman numerals, capital letters, Arabic numerals, and lower case letters should be used.

2. Each number or letter should be followed by a period and a space.

3. Each sentence should begin with a capital letter and end with a period.

4. Each sentence should be separated from the others by double spacing.

VI. The writer should strive for clear thought and precise statement.

- A. He should seek the natural organization of his material.
- B. He should formulate his thesis carefully before outlining.
- C. He should subdivide logically and thoughtfully.
- D. He should continually strive for exact, precise statements of his ideas.
- E. He should realize that a well-done outline represents as much as three-quarters of the work of composition.