

Outlining and Summarizing Guidelines

Purpose

An outline is a useful tool to help you study information or organize your research in order to prepare a report. An outline is an overview of a document with the ideas or information listed in a hierarchical order. The main idea is at the top, followed by secondary or supporting ideas called sub-topics. An outline could be considered an ordered list of the topics or ideas.

By writing a summary, you condense an article and use your own words to present the main ideas. The length of the summary will depend on its purpose, the length and number of ideas in the original article, and the depth of detail needed. You make summaries all the time. For example, when a friend asks you to tell her about a movie you watched, you don't re-tell the movie scene by scene; you tell her the general plot and highlights. In this way a 90-minute movie is summarized in 5 minutes or less.

Steps to Effectively Outline and Summarize a Reading Selection

Step #1.

- Quickly scan the entire reading selection, looking for the headings or sub-headings.
- Read the heading and sub-headings and try to determine the main topics or ideas contained in the reading selection.
- Quickly read the entire selection once, stopping at the end of each paragraph to write a list of key words found in each section. Also, in a different color ink write any words that that you are unsure of their meaning.

Step #2.

- Slowly read the first and last paragraphs.
- Look at the key words you wrote down and add any new ones.
- Look at the unfamiliar words you wrote down and try to determine their meanings from their context—see if the words around them give a clue to their meanings.
- Note the order you wrote the words and think of the key ideas these words came from.

Step #3.

- Begin an outline by writing what you think is the main idea of the reading selection. Look carefully at the first and last paragraphs and the key words to determine the main idea.
- Start making an outline by listing the main idea as the top item and use the Roman numeral one.

- **Example:**

- I. Main Idea

Step #4.

- Slowly read the entire selection, beginning with the first paragraph again.
- Look for the first sub-topic. Try to distinguish between sub-topics and details. Sub-topics are broad categories or ideas, just not as broad as the main idea. Details are the specifics about a sub-topic that expand or support the main idea.
- List the first sub-topic on the outline under the main idea.
 - **Example:**
 - I. Main Idea
 - A. Sub-topic

Step #5.

- Continue reading to find other sub-topics.
- Use a different letter for each.
 - **Example:**
 - II. Main Idea
 - A. Sub-topic #1
 - B. Sub-topic #2
 - C. Sub-topic #3

Step #6.

- Re-read the selection to find the details about each sub-topic. The speed you use to re-read will depend on how well you understand the topics. If you understand the material you can read it quickly. If you are having a hard time understanding, you may need to read it very slowly and check your understanding of each sentence or section.
- The details are the evidence, facts, and information for each sub-topic.
- Use a number for each detail
- Remember the key terms you listed earlier may be details.
 - **Example:**
 - III. Main Idea
 - A. Sub-topic #1
 - 1. Detail
 - 2. Detail
 - B. Sub-topic #2
 - 1. Detail
 - C. Sub-topic #3

Step #7.

- Use your outline to write your summary.
- Include the main idea, the sub-topics, and enough of the details to support the main idea in your summary. The summary should be in your own words.