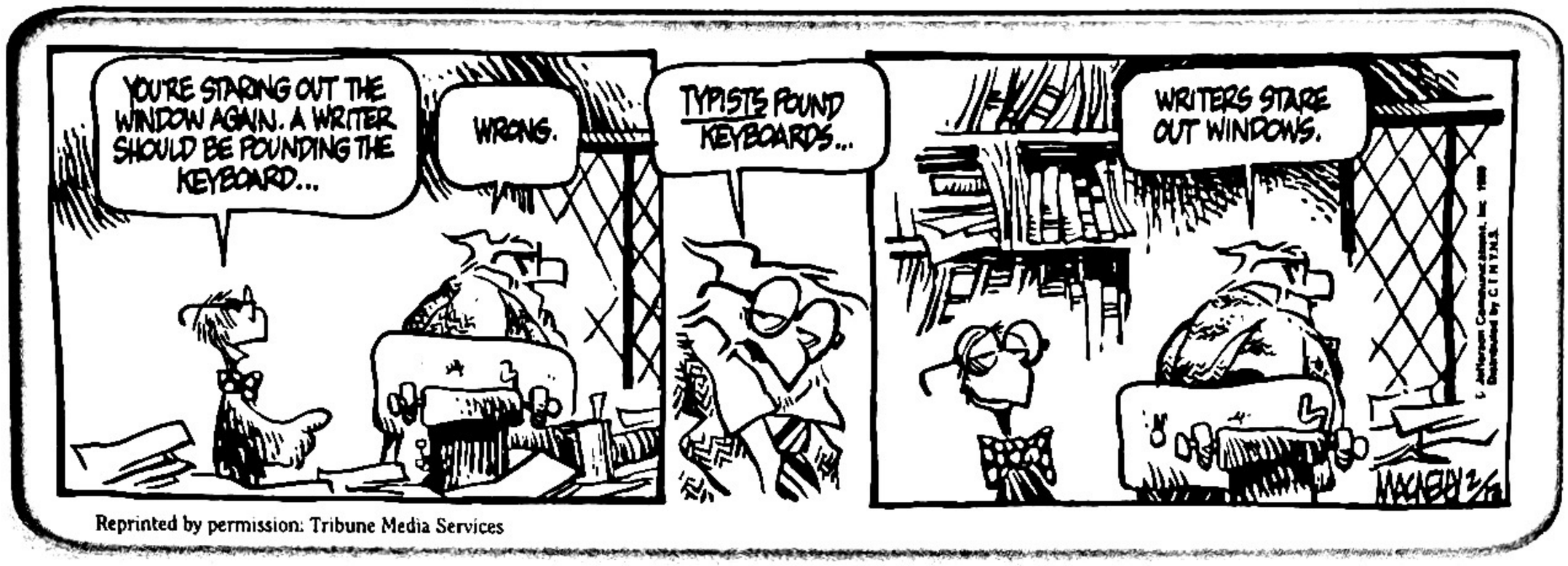
Write a Final Outline



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The last step before you actually start writing your paper is finalizing your outline. If you did a working outline in Step 3, you will need to update and revise it now. But the writing process isn't exactly the same for everyone. You may be a writer who writes first and outlines later. Check with your teacher to see if it's okay to postpone—but not omit—the outline step until after you write your first draft. Keep in mind also that some teachers do not require a formal outline. Ask your teacher whether you will have to submit one.

Content and Organization

Your final outline shows at a glance the two essential aspects of your paper: its content and its organization. Usually, a final outline includes a third element, your thesis statement, which comes right after the title and before the outline of the body of the paper.

The three important parts of a research paper that *never* appear in an outline are the introductory paragraph(s), the paper's conclusion or concluding paragraph(s), and the Works Cited list. You will learn more about these parts of your paper in Step 6 and Step 7.

Hint!

Some teachers do not want the thesis statement to appear in the outline. Find out whether your teacher wants the thesis statement included.

☑ Choose either a topic outline or a sentence outline.

Your outline must be either a topic outline or a sentence outline, not a combination of both. You cannot mix the two types of outlines. Your teacher may make the decision for you by specifying which type you will be required to write.

In a topic outline, the headings and subheadings are a series of words or phrases, not complete sentences.

EXAMPLE

I. Native American "code talkers" during World Wars I and II
   A. Who they were
      1. Their tribes
      2. Their languages
   B. What they did
   C. Why they were so successful
      1. Spoken (not written) languages
      2. Languages totally unfamiliar to enemy code breakers

Hint!

Each type of outline has its advantages. A topic outline is quicker and easier to write. A sentence outline takes more time but has two distinct points in its favor: (1) It furnishes ready-made topic sentences for your paragraphs. (2) Because it forces you to summarize what you are going to say about each topic, it can reveal problems in the organization of your ideas.

In a sentence outline, every heading and subheading is a complete sentence. (A complete sentence contains a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought.)

EXAMPLE

I. Native Americans served successfully as "code talkers" in the United States Armed Forces during World Wars I and II.
   A. They were fluent speakers of their native languages.
      1. They were Choctaw, Navajo, Comanche, Winnebago, Kiowa, and Cherokee.
      2. Each tribe spoke a unique language.
   B. Code talkers transmitted military information via walkie-talkie radios and field telephones to other speakers of their language.
   C. Enemy code breakers were unable to understand the American Indians' languages.
      1. Almost all were spoken languages only and had no written form.
      2. These tribal languages were totally unfamiliar to outsiders.

The Form and Logic of an Outline

☑ Follow the correct outline form.

The main headings and subheadings are written in a standard form.

- A number or letter precedes each heading. Each number or letter is followed by a period or is enclosed in parentheses.
- The first word in every heading begins with a capital letter. Sentence outlines (but *not* topic outlines) have a period at the end of each heading.
- Indentations show a heading's level of importance. An indented heading is a subdivision of the preceding heading.

Title of Paper

Thesis statement:_____.

I. Main heading

A. First-level subheading

1. Second-level subheading
2. Second-level subheading

a. Third-level subheading

b. Third-level subheading

(1) Fourth-level subheading

(2) Fourth-level subheading

(a) Fifth-level subheading

(b) Fifth-level subheading

B. First-level subheading

etc.

☑ Identify the major sections of your paper. These will be your main (Roman numeral) headings.

How can you figure out what the main headings of your outline should be? If you did a working outline to help guide your note-taking (Step 3), you have already made a stab at identifying the main headings and subheadings. Compare your stacks of note cards (separated according to headings) with your working outline. Do you want to change some of the main headings or reword them? Do you want to add new main headings? Do you want to drop some of the main headings?

Hint!

How many main headings should you have? At least three and no more than five. If you do not have enough main headings or if you have too many, rethink the organization of your paper.

When you are figuring out your main headings and subheadings, you are using the critical-thinking skill of **analysis**—that is, you are breaking your topic into its smaller, separate parts. (When you analyze something, you break it into its separate parts and examine each part. For example, you analyze a short story by discussing its plot, characters, point of view, setting, and theme.)

Throughout your outline, make sure that headings and subheadings are **discrete**—that is, entirely separate. Headings and subheadings should not overlap or duplicate each other. There are two things wrong with the main headings in the following example. Can you find them both?

ILLOGICAL

Topic: Why the movie *The Wizard of Oz* remains an enduring classic

I. Its plot

II. Its story line

III. Its music

IV. Its visual effects and songs

Main headings I and II are about the same thing (plot and story line mean the same thing), and the "songs" part of heading IV duplicates the "music" of heading III.

LOGICAL

Topic: Why the movie *The Wizard of Oz* remains an enduring classic

I. Its plot

II. Its characters

III. Its music

IV. Its special effects

Here are four common types of research papers with examples of how the topic has been broken up into main headings:

1. Examine a problem. Discuss one or more solutions.

Topic: How to reduce school violence

I. Statistics past and present

II. Solution 1: school crime-watch organization

III. Solution 2: peer mediation program

IV. Solution 3: increased security

2. Examine an effect. Discuss several causes.

Topic: What has caused global warming, and how serious is it?

I. Increased burning of fossil fuels (coal, gas, oil) produces increases in carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.

II. Even small environmental changes may lead to significant global warming.

III. Clouds may either raise or lower Earth's temperatures.

3. **Examine a cause. Discuss several effects.**
Topic: Regular exercise and a low-fat diet

   I. Decrease in heart disease
   II. Decrease in obesity
   III. Increase in average life span

4. **History of something (a movement, an event, an idea)**
Topic: The essay, a relatively new literary form

   I. First essays (*Essais,* written by French lawyer and scholar Michel de Montaigne, 1533–1592)
   II. Formal essays (e.g., those written by American essayist, poet, and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803–1882)
   III. Informal essays (20th century to present)

Analyzing a Topic to Formulate Main Headings

Use your imagination and common sense to write three or four main headings that might be covered in a research paper on each of the numbered topics that follow. (**Note:** There are no right answers to this exercise, only different approaches to analyzing the topic.) Work with a partner or in a small group, and compare your main headings with those of your classmates.

1. How to increase voter turnout in the United States
   I. _____
   II. _____
   III. _____
   IV. _____

2. How cell phones have changed American life
   I. _____
   II. _____
   III. _____
   IV. _____

3. The three (or four) best things about television
   I. _____
   II. _____
   III. _____
   IV. _____

4. How advertisers persuade you to buy their products

I. _____

II. _____

III. _____

IV. _____

Exercise 2 Identifying the Main Headings in Your Research Paper

Write your topic and the working title of your research paper. On the lines below, divide your paper into at least three main headings.

Topic _____

Working Title _____

I. _____

II. _____

III. _____

IV. _____

☑ Divide the main headings into subheadings and then into sub-subheadings, as needed. You can never have only one subheading; you must have at least two.

It is not logical to divide a larger heading into only one subheading. (Think of dividing a whole pie into pieces: You can cut the pie many different ways, but unless you have at least two pieces, you have not divided the pie.)

Here is part of an outline showing subheadings and sub-subheadings:

EXAMPLE

Topic: Why the movie *The Wizard of Oz* remains an enduring classic

I. Its plot
   A. Frame of story
      1. Tornado in Kansas
      2. Return to Kansas
   B. Fantastic adventure
   C. Suspenseful conflicts
      1. Good versus evil
      2. Struggle to return home
II. Its characters
   A. Girl as hero
   B. Sympathetic scarecrow, tin man, lion

e-writing Most word-processing programs have a built-in outline capability. Check the Help menu for instructions on how to create a formal (traditional) outline. Some word-processing programs have Outline View as an option in the View menu. Hit Tab or Tab + Shift to toggle your outline points.

☑ Within any level, word the headings so that they are parallel in structure.

In writing, *parallel* means having the same grammatical structure. In the following example, the headings in A, B, and C are parallel. Each heading is made up of a noun followed by an infinitive phrase (*to* plus a verb).

II. Instruments to predict volcanic eruptions

A. Chemical sensor to analyze gases in volcanic plume

B. Seismometer (buried sensor) to record vibrations in magma

C. Sensors to measure cracks in volcano's surface

Hint! Try this "bottom-up" technique to check the logic of your outline: Read the outline from the bottom up. Each group of lesser subheadings should "add up" to the more important heading above it.

In the following example, the A, B, and C headings are not parallel.

II. Instruments to predict volcanic eruptions

A. Chemical sensor for measuring gases in volcanic plume

B. How a seismometer (buried sensor) is used

C. Cracks on surface

Exercise 3 **Parallel Structure**

Revise the headings in the following outlines to make them parallel. (Write your corrections on the page.) Compare your revised headings with a partner's.

Topic: Jane Addams and her work

I. About Jane Addams's life

II. 1889, helped found Hull House, a settlement house in Chicago.

III. Addams had other interests.

A. Her work for women's rights

B. Winning the Nobel Peace Prize

Topic: Animated cartoons: The technology

I. Artists who draw cartoons by hand

A. Summary of what makes cartoon characters move

B. Earliest short cartoons

C. In Walt Disney studios, the famous group of animators —the Nine Old Men—who created full-length movies such as *Bambi, Peter Pan, 101 Dalmatians.*

II. Animation done by computers

A. How it works

B. *Tron* (1984), first computer-animated film

III. What is the future of animated cartoons?

GUIDELINES

Writing a Final Outline

- Write either a sentence outline or a topic outline. *Don't mix the two types.*
- A number or letter precedes each heading. Each number or letter is followed by a period or enclosed in parentheses.
- Every heading begins with a capital letter. Sentence outlines (but not topic outlines) have a period at the end of each heading.
- Indentations show a heading's level of importance. An indented heading is a subdivision of the preceding heading.
- If any heading calls for subheadings, there must be two or more.
- The wording of headings within a section must be parallel.

Exercise 4 What Might the Headings Be?

The note cards in this exercise are for a report on the development of skyscrapers and their effects on the people who live and work in them. The thesis statement for the report is "Two American inventions—steel-frame construction and a safety device for elevators—led to the skyscraper, which altered Earth's human landscape." Read the notes carefully. Then on a separate sheet of paper or on your computer, develop an outline based on them. Try to make your headings and subheadings logical and parallel. Meet with several classmates to talk about your outlines based on these notes.

History of skyscrapers—Chicago 1

Before skyscrapers, masonry (brick or stone) construction—thick walls at base to support upper stories

Chicago fire Oct.8–10, 1871, destroyed 3 1/2 mi. central city → building boom

Steel-frame construction (unlike masonry) allowed windows, more room @ base, greater number of stories

1st skyscraper = 9-story Chicago's Home Insurance Co. Bldg. 1884–85, architect Major Wm. LeBaron Jenney, "father of the skyscraper" Anecdote: Jenney got steel-frame construction idea when wife put heavy book on top of metal birdcage—thin wires supported it

Great Chicago architect—Louis Henry Sullivan.

pp. 539–541

Importance of Elevator 1

Essential invention—elevators

In NYC, Elisha Graves Otis (1811–1861) invented safety device: stopped elevator from falling if chain broke; 1st passenger elevator 1857

Otis patented device in 1861, built steam elevators "vertical railways"—used esp. in hotels; later powered by electric motors

pp. 537–538

History of word "skyscraper" 2

1794—triangular sail on a clipper ship; original meaning

1826—high-standing horse

1857—very tall man

1892—person riding a high bicycle

1891—tall building of many stories; first use in Boston Massachusetts Journal

p. 43

Effects of skyscrapers 3

Residential and business skyscrapers: treat separately?

Some effects: growth of cities as centers of commerce, greater population density, less human scale (no neighbors, no sense of community)

Positive: great views, lots of light, efficient use of city's limited space

Negative: "too impersonal," hate waiting for elevators

pp. 430–431

What Lewis Mumford says 3

"If fast transportation made the horizon the limit for urban sprawl, the new methods of construction made the 'sky the limit,' as gamblers loved to say."

Acc. to Mumford, urban density "befouled & poisonous air, constricted housing, demoralized social life, teeming with violence & crime"

pp. 430–431

What workers say 4

Survey of people who work in skyscrapers

Their fears (safety: dependence on elevators & electricity; dangerous in earthquake & fire)

Convenient to fast public transportation

Exercise 5 Revising Your Working Outline

Spend some time looking over your note cards and your working outline. As you do so, ask yourself each of the following questions. (You may want to write down your answers on a separate sheet of paper or on your computer.) They will help you to decide what changes you will need to make in your outline.

- Which headings or subheadings need more information?
- Are there headings or subheadings that need to be added?
- Are there headings or subheadings that should be dropped?
- Which headings or subheadings need to be changed or reworded?
- What other changes do I need to make?

Exercise 6 Writing Your Final Outline

On a separate sheet of paper or on your computer, write your final outline.

Exercise 7 Checking Your Progress

Answer each of the following questions about the work you've done so far.

1. What problems did you encounter when you were trying to finalize your outline?

_____

_____

2. How did you solve those problems?

_____

_____

3. How did you improve your outline as you developed it?

_____

_____

4. If you are not on schedule, what do you need to do to catch up?

_____

_____

Checklist Review

Are you on schedule? Check the Timetables on page 10.

- ☐ Choose either a topic outline or a sentence outline.
- ☐ Follow the correct outline form.
- ☐ Identify the major sections of your paper. These will be your main (Roman numeral) headings.
- ☐ Divide the main headings into subheadings and then into sub-subheadings, as needed. You can never have only one subheading; you must have at least two.
- ☐ Within any level, word the headings so that they are parallel in structure.