

How to Create a Sentence Outline

What is a Sentence Outline?

The sentence outline is done in full sentences. It is normally used when your paper focuses on complex details. The sentence outline is especially useful for this kind of paper because sentences themselves have many of the details in them. A sentence outline also allows you to include those details in the sentences instead of having to create an outline of many short phrases that goes on page after page. Benefits of writing a sentence outline include:

1. **Clarity.** If you can't write a clear sentence summarizing the paragraph's point, you certainly can't write a clear paragraph.
2. **Flow of argument.** It is much easier to quickly judge whether the present order of paragraphs (as sentences in the outline) really makes the argument in the most effective way. You may be able to omit one or more paragraphs and still make your arguments.
3. **Efficiency.** Revision of the plan of paper is much easier and quicker if you have only to delete or re-order sentences. Doing this on the completed draft involves much more work.
 1. Since a concept must be explained when it first appears, interchanging paragraphs will require moving definitions.
 2. Paragraphs should smoothly flow into each other. Reordering paragraphs may require extensive rewriting.
4. **Writing to length.** With a sentence outline you can easily judge how long the manuscript will be and modify it to keep the essential material within the prescribed length.
5. **Time.** All the above -- clarity, argument flow, efficiency, length management -- can be done faster using a sentence outline.

Steps to Writing a Sentence Outline

Before you begin creating your sentence outline, you should be clear about the following:

1. Determine the purpose of your paper.
2. Determine the audience you are writing for.
3. Develop the thesis of your paper.

You should then use notecards (they are old-school, but offer the flexibility you will need to organize your thoughts) to perform the following:

1. **Brainstorm:** List all the ideas that you want to include in your paper onto notecards (gathered through research, either through reading or direct research).
2. **Organize:** Group related ideas together. This may be accomplished by using notecards and sorting them into groups.
3. **Order:** Arrange material in subsections from general to specific or from abstract to concrete (e.g., organize the groups notecards into logical order).
4. **Label:** Create main and sub headings for each group.

Keep Your Outline Flexible

Although the format of an outline is rigid, it shouldn't make you inflexible about how to write your paper. Often when you start writing, especially about a subject that you don't know well, the paper takes new directions. If your paper changes direction, or you add new sections, then feel free to change the outline-- just as you would make corrections on a crude map as you become more familiar with the terrain you are exploring. Major reorganizations are not uncommon; your outline will help you stay organized and focused.

However, when your paper diverges from your outline, it can also mean that you have lost your focus, and hence the structure of your paper. How do you know whether to change the paper to fit the outline or change the outline to fit the paper? A good way to check yourself is to use the paper to recreate the outline. This is extremely useful for checking the organization of the paper. If the resulting outline says what you want it to say in an order that is easy to follow, the organization of your paper has been successful. If you discover that it's difficult to create an outline from what you have written, then you need to revise the paper. Your outline can help you with this, because the problems in the outline will show you where the paper has become disorganized.

Sentence Outline Format Example

The following is a general guide for creating a sentence outline:

- I. Introduction (include in all outlines)
 - A. Attention-Getter: Simply introduce your topic in an interesting way, without using a cliché or pitch.
 - B. Thesis: Use your thesis statement here (includes subject, predicate, and information hunger) in one single sentence.
 - C. Content: Explain the scope of the content included in the paper.
 - D. Transition: Lead, don't push, the reader into the body of the paper.
- II. Body (include in all outlines)
 - A. First main point: Write in complete sentences. Main Points are never questions, quotes, or information that requires a source citation.
 1. Subpoint: Make sure your sentences wrap to the start of the sentence to maintain the outline formatting as illustrated here.
 - a. Sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
 - b. Sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
 - i. Sub-sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
 - ii. Sub-sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
 2. Subpoint: Make sure your sentences wrap to the start of the sentence to maintain the outline formatting as illustrated here.
 - a. Sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
 - b. Sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
 - i. Sub-sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
 - ii. Sub-sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
 3. Transition into second main point by leading, not pushing, the reader into the next topic.
 - B. Second main point: Make your main points clear by using parallel language when possible
 1. Subpoint: Make sure your sentences wrap to the start of the sentence to maintain the outline formatting as illustrated here.
 - a. Sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
 - b. Sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
 - i. Sub-sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
 - ii. Sub-sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
 2. Subpoint: Make sure your sentences wrap to the start of the sentence to maintain the outline formatting as illustrated here.
 - a. Sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
 - b. Sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
 - i. Sub-sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
 - ii. Sub-sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
 3. Transition into second main point by leading, not pushing, the reader into the next topic.
 - C. Third main point: Make your main points clear by using parallel language when possible
 1. Subpoint: Make sure your sentences wrap to the start of the sentence to maintain the outline formatting as illustrated here.
 - a. Sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
 - b. Sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
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 - ii. Sub-sub-subpoint: How much development you need depends upon your paper
 3. Transition into conclusion by leading, not pushing, the reader.
 - D. Transition into conclusion by leading, not pushing, the reader.
- III. Conclusion (include in all outlines)
 - A. Summary: Paraphrase the thesis and the main points of your paper.
 - B. Clincher: "Reference to the Introduction" because it provides such strong closure.
- IV. Sources Cited (list of reference cited) or Bibliography (list of both cited and not cited sources)

(Adapted from <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/544/02/>, <http://web.psych.washington.edu/writingcenter/writingguides/pdf/outline.pdf>, http://www.physics.ohio-state.edu/~wilkins/writing/Assign/so/sent_outline.html, and <http://www.austincc.edu/colangelo/pcm/fullsentenceoutlineformat.htm>)