

Thesis and Model Outline

Step 1—Formulate your thesis. Your thesis is a formal, exact statement of what your paper will be about. It probably will change as you consider the information you have. Think about what you are trying to present and emphasize in your paper. The thesis is to the essay what a topic sentence is to a paragraph. It will tell your reader what your paper is about as well as what support you have for that claim. Eventually you will revise this into a final thesis, which will be the last sentence of your introductory, or first, paragraph.

Step 2—Develop your outline. An outline is important because you will organize the notes from your sources based on the ideas in the working outline. The outline will map the body paragraphs of your paper. The introduction and conclusion will **not** be part of the outline.

Breaking it Down: Every outline for this paper must have at least Roman numerals I, II, and III. Every Roman numeral must have at least an A and a B. **Remember, on any outline, for every A you must have a B, and for every 1 you must have a 2.** This is because you cannot break an idea into fewer than two parts.

Keep in mind that the outline is like a table of contents for your paper. I should be able to follow your outline as I read your paper and be able to see exactly what I'm going to read about next. Be sure they match.

Topics: We will be writing **topic outlines** for this assignment. This means each heading for each subsection of your outline will be a topic. A topic is always a word or phrase, not a complete sentence. Topics are not titles, so you will not use title capitalization. **Capitalize** the first letter of the first word of each topic (aside from proper nouns, of course). Also, the words on an outline must be your own. Never use direct quotations or copy exactly from an article. Finally, try to make topics within each subsection **grammatically parallel**. For instance, if you use a noun phrase for the topic of Roman numeral I, then you should also use noun phrases for II, II, and IV. If A is a verb phrase under I, then B, C, and D should be verb phrases as well.

Format (see the sample student paper for an example): Spacing is very important on an outline. You must indent each new division of the outline. Put the letter or numeral of each division directly below the first word of the larger heading above. Begin each heading with a capital letter.

Your outline is not officially part of your paper, so you will head it separately from your paper. Be sure you use the MLA format for headings. The title on your outline should match the title of your paper. The thesis statement follows the title. The thesis statement here should be explicitly labeled, and it should match, word for word, the last sentence of the introductory paragraph of your paper. Also, your thesis should also match your outline by listing the main topics in the same order of your body paragraphs.

Typical Problems with Outlines

1. Be sure that your thesis matches your outline. The points in your thesis must match the Roman Numerals in your outline.
2. Avoid phrasing headings/subheadings as questions
3. Use periods after outline numbers and letters (but not after the headings)
4. Headings/Subheadings should not be written in complete sentences. Make them as short as possible.
5. Follow correct formatting/spacing procedures. Note how the letter for a subheading lines up under the first letter of the heading above it. Also, if the heading/subheading runs into a second line, be sure to indent that line as well—it should line up with the beginning of the heading.
6. Avoid specific details or statistics in your outline. Only include general topic.
7. Capitalize the first letter of every heading/subheading.
8. Always break down subheadings further if possible.

Developing a Tentative Thesis

Now that you have chosen your movie, prepared your working source cards, and done some background reading you are ready to formulate your tentative thesis. This is a formal, exact statement of what your paper is going to be about. In other words, what are you trying to prove in your paper? Remember that a thesis is to an essay what a topic sentence is to a paragraph. It should state your topic and indicate the purpose of your paper as well as the organizational plan that you intend to follow.

For example, if you are writing an essay that discusses the critics' opinions of what was good and what was bad about a movie and coming to a conclusion about that movie based on those opinions, then you need to allude to both opinions in your thesis as well as put them in the order that they will be discussed in your paper. Remember that whatever types of critics' comments, either good or bad, that you have found the most of will be the last section in your paper. Example:

Although *Ghost* was a touching, romantic movie that was a phenomenal hit at the box office, the critics panned the script, actors, and direction.

If you are comparing a sequel to an original, then your thesis might read something like this:

The directors and producers of *Home Alone* should have heeded the old adage, "It is best to leave well enough alone," as the sequel *Home Alone II: Lost in New York* is not nearly the movie the original was.

If you are choosing two or three aspects of the movie to discuss, then your thesis might read something like this:

Not only is *A Dry White Season* have all the elements of a good movie, but it also educates the audience as to the injustice of apartheid in South Africa and the brutal treatment endured by many of its citizens.

Your tentative thesis may change before you write your rough draft, but you must have a final thesis before you can begin to write your formal outline and your paper. **Remember that the thesis will be the last sentence in your first paragraph.**

When you have your tentative thesis, you can begin to develop your working outline. Although every documented essay, like every other essay, will have three main parts: an introduction, a body and a conclusion, **you will only outline the body of your paper.**

Every outline must have a Roman numeral I, II, and III. Every Roman numeral must have an A and a B. Remember that on any outline, for A you must have a B, and for every 1 you must have a 2. You cannot break an idea down into fewer than two parts. Also, all the words on the outline must be *your own*. There can be no direct quotes or copying exactly from your articles. There is no documentation on an outline either. Watch your spacing on an outline as this is one of the major things that distinguish an outline from any other type of writing. Indent each new division of the outline. Put the letter or numeral directly below the first word of the larger heading above. Begin each heading with a capital letter.