OUTLINES

An outline can be an important aid to your composing, particularly after you have generated some ideas and formulated a tentative thesis. However, keep in mind that while an outline can help give some direction to your paper, it does not guarantee "good organization." Some outlines only identify the assorted subtopics a writer hopes to cover, giving a false impression of order and purpose. Even if some parts of your outline look like subtopics, you will know that they represent necessary steps in the case you will be making for your thesis.

Writers differ greatly in their fondness for an outline. If, like some of them, you find that you simply cannot work from an outline in writing your first draft, you might want to make an outline of the draft when you have finished it. This outline will help you check the organization of your paper and spot areas that may need to be revised.

For some papers, an informal outline may serve your purposes. This type of outline may only note your thesis and your major supporting ideas that you plan to develop in individual paragraphs.

A formal outline is often used for longer and more complex writing tasks. This type of outline may show through indentation and more than one set of numbers, that some points are more important than others. In other words, it can help you establish the degrees of importance among your main ideas and how subpoints illustrate or support those ideas.

In constructing a formal outline, keep the following guidelines in mind:

1. Place the thesis at the top of the page.

2. Use parallel grammatical structure for parallel ideas.

3. Use sentences unless phrases are clear.

(over)
4. Use the conventional system of numbers and letters for the levels of generality.

I.
   
   A.
   B.

   1.

   2.

      a.

      b.

      (1)

      (2)

      (a)

      (b)

II.

5. Always use at least two subdivisions for a category.

6. Limit the number of major sections in the outline depending on the length of the paper.

(If you think you have too many roman numerals, try to find some way of clustering the items into a few major categories with more subcategories.)

Be flexible. Treat your outline as a tentative plan that may need to be revised once you begin reworking your paper.