Outlines

For many essays, especially those with a fairly straightforward structure, a simple listing of ideas and support for them may provide adequate direction for your writing. An informal outline is usually more detailed than a scratch outline, including key general points and the specific evidence for them, but not as detailed as a formal outline. (Remember: for proper MLA formatting, double space your outline, unless your instructor specifies otherwise!) Check out the examples below to see what we mean.

Informal outline

An informal outline is especially useful when time is of the essence, and you need to get your thoughts down quickly. This kind of outline is used to explore a topic by jotting down notes comprised of single words and phrases that indicate the general order of the essay.

- Begin with a thesis statement
- List all major points of evidence you plan to include in the order they will appear in the essay
- Under each major point of evidence, identify at least one or two supporting ideas that could be used to explain each major point

For example:

**Thesis statement:** After Home Inc.’s hiring practices were exposed in the media, the company avoided a scandal with policy changes and a well-publicized outreach to employees and consumers.

Background on scandal
- 1. Previous hiring practices
- 2. Media exposure and public response (brief)

Policy changes
- 1. Application forms
- 2. Interviewing procedures
- 3. Training of personnel

Outreach to employees
- 1. Signs and letters
- 2. Meetings and workshops

Outreach to consumers
- 1. Press conference
- 2. Store signs
- 3. Advertising—print and radio
Formal outline

- Begin with a thesis statement
- Use labels (roman numerals, letters, and Arabic numbers) to indicate the order and relative importance of each point
- Indent lines to show which parts belong under which section headings
- Group ideas thoughtfully so that each section and subsection reflects logical relationships
- Topics of equal generality appear in parallel headings.
- Each subdivision has at least two parts.
- The introduction and conclusion may be omitted (though not, of course, from the essay).

For example:

**Thesis statement:** My mother’s experience of having her job outsourced taught a lesson that Thomas L. Friedman overlooks: technical training by itself can be too narrow to produce the communicators and problem solvers needed by contemporary businesses.

I. Summary of Friedman’s article
   A. Reasons for outsourcing
      1. Improved technology and access
      2. Well-educated workers
      3. Productive workers
      4. Lower wages
   B. Need for improved technical training in US

II. Mother’s experience
   A. Outsourcing of job
      1. Mother’s education, experience, performance
      2. Employer’s cost savings
   B. Retention of managers’ jobs
      1. Planning skills
      2. Communication skills

III. Conclusions about ideal education
   A. Needs of US businesses
      1. Technical skills
      2. Management skills
         a) Communication
         b) Problem solving
         c) Versatility
   B. Personal goals
      1. Technical training
      2. English and history courses for management skills