Four Main Components for Effective Outlines

Summary:

This resource describes why outlines are useful, what types of outlines exist, suggestions for developing effective outlines, and how outlines can be used as an invention strategy for writing.

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Ideally, you should follow the four suggestions presented here to create an effective outline. When creating a topic outline, follow these two rules for capitalization: For first-level heads, present the information using all upper-case letters; and for secondary and tertiary items, use upper and lower-case letters. The examples are taken from the Sample Outline handout.

Parallelism—How do I accomplish this?

Each heading and subheading should preserve parallel structure. If the first heading is a verb, the second heading should be a verb. Example:

I. CHOOSE DESIRED COLLEGES
II. PREPARE APPLICATION

("Choose" and "Prepare" are both verbs. The present tense of the verb is usually the preferred form for an outline.)

Coordination—How do I accomplish this?

All the information contained in Heading 1 should have the same significance as the information contained in Heading 2. The same goes for the subheadings (which should be less significant than the headings). Example:

I. VISIT AND EVALUATE COLLEGE CAMPUSES
II. VISIT AND EVALUATE COLLEGE WEBSITES
   A. Note important statistics
   B. Look for interesting classes
Subordination—How do I accomplish this?

The information in the headings should be more general, while the information in the subheadings should be more specific. Example:

I. DESCRIBE AN INFLUENTIAL PERSON IN YOUR LIFE
   A. Favorite high school teacher
   B. Grandparent

(A favorite teacher and grandparent are specific examples from the generalized category of influential people in your life.)

Division—How do I accomplish this?

Each heading should be divided into 2 or more parts. Example:

I. COMPILE RÉSUMÉ
   A. List relevant coursework
   B. List work experience
   C. List volunteer experience

(The heading "Compile Résumé" is divided into 3 parts.)

Technically, there is no limit to the number of subdivisions for your headings; however, if you seem to have a lot, it may be useful to see if some of the parts can be combined.