How to Make an Outline

0:00 Owl: Welcome to How to Make an Outline, an instructional video on reading comprehension brought to you by the Excelsior College Online Writing Lab.

0:14 Teachers often talk about the importance of making an outline.

0:19 However, students are often unfamiliar with how and why to make one.

0:25 Outlines are a great way to organize and evaluate ideas.

0:29 They can be used as a pre-writing method to get you ready to write.

0:33 But they can also help you improve your reading comprehension by breaking down the text into its main ideas.

0:41 Outlines present information in an organized and logical manner.

0:46 Whether you’re outlining a text or a concept, your outline should focus on main ideas and key details.

0:53 Organizing this information into an outline will show how the information is related.

0:58 The finished product will cover a lot of material in a relatively small space.

1:05 In an outline information consists of heading and subheadings that are laid out using an ordering system comprised of capitalized and uncapsulated Roman numerals, letters, and numbers.

1:18 This method provides an efficient and logical way to present information and show how it is related.

Displayed on screen

Sample Outline

I. Title
   A. Heading 1
   B. Heading 2
      1. Subheading 1
      2. Subheading 2
         i.
         ii.
            a.
            b.

1:26 In order to use the outlining method correctly, you’ll first need to understand the four rules it follows.

1:32 They are: parallelism, coordination, subordination, and division.

1:40 Let’s go over each rule.

1:44 The first rule of outlining is parallelism.

1:48 This means headings of the same level should be of the same kind.
For instance, if the first heading is a verb, the second heading should also be a verb.

Example:

I. Three types of muscle tissue
   A. Skeletal muscle
   B. Cardiac muscle
   C. Smooth muscle

In this example of an outline for a chapter on muscle tissue, the headings “Skeletal muscle,” “Cardiac muscle,” and “Smooth muscle” are of the same level because they are ordered with a capital letter.

In this case, they obey the rule of parallelism by all being nouns.

The second rule of outlining is coordination.

This means that 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.

In other words, headings and subheadings of the same level should be of the same rank, which means the same level of importance.

Example:

A. Skeletal muscle
   B. Cardiac muscle
   C. Smooth muscle
      1. Definition
      2. Description
      3. Examples

In this example, the headings “A,” “B,” and “C” are of the same rank, while the numbers “1,” “2,” and “3” are also of the same rank.

The third rule of outlining is subordination.

This means that the information in the headings should be more general, while the information in the subheadings should be more specific.

The movement from general to specific information is indicated by indenting from left to right.

Example:

A. Skeletal muscle
   1. Definition
      i. Found throughout the body
      ii. Voluntary
      iii. Responsible for movement

In this example, “Found throughout the body,” “Voluntary,” and “Responsible for movement” are specific examples of the more general category “Definition.”
The fourth and final rule of outlining is division. This means that each heading must have at least two subheadings in order to be divided. If you can’t divide a heading into at least two parts, then it doesn’t require subheadings.

Example:

I. Three types of muscle tissue
   A. Skeletal muscle
   B. Cardiac muscle
      1. Definition
         i. Found in the heart
         ii. Involuntary
         iii. Pump blood into circulatory system
      2. Description

In this example, the heading “Three types of muscle tissue” is broken down into two subheadings—“A” and “B.” “B” is further broken down into two subheadings—“1” and “2.” And “1” is even further refined by being broken down into three subheadings.

Now, if we put all four rules together—parallelism, coordination, subordination, and division—we get an outline that looks like this. (Shown after the transcript.)

Remember to write a title at the top of your outline that identifies the text you are outlining.

Creating an outline for a text is easier if you know where to look for the most important information in the text.

Depending on the type of text you’re reading, you should focus your attention on one or more of the following elements: headings and subheadings, abstracts, introductions, topic sentences, bold-faced or italicized words, summaries, and conclusions.

Remember that your outline should be as long or short as you need it to be depending on the length and depth of the text you’re reading.

I hope you have a better idea about how and why to make an outline.

They’re not only great for pre-writing, but also for improving your reading comprehension.

Click here for a template on how to make an outline.

Thanks for listening to this instructional video on How to Make an Outline!

Visit the Excelsior College Online Writing Lab for more support with reading and writing skills.
Sample Outline

Title: Chapter 10 – Muscle Tissue

I. Three types of muscle tissue
   A. Skeletal muscle
      1. Definition
         i. Found throughout the body
         ii. Voluntary
         iii. Responsible for movement
      2. Description
         i. Layers of connective tissue
            a. Epimysium
            b. Perimysium
            c. Endomysium
         ii. Muscle fibers
            a. Long
            b. Cylindrical
            c. Striated
            d. Banded
      3. Examples
         i. Biceps
         ii. Triceps
         iii. Deltoids
         iv. Trapezius
   B. Cardiac muscle
      1. Definition
         i. Found in the heart
         ii. Involuntary
         iii. Pump blood into circulatory system
      2. Description
         i. Similar in structure to skeletal muscle
            a. Shorter
            b. Only one cell nucleus
         ii. Connected by intercalated discs
         iii. Controlled by pacemaker cells
   C. Smooth muscle
      1. Definition
         i. Found around organs
         ii. Involuntary
         iii. Control organ functions
      2. Description
         i. Spindle-shaped muscle fibers
         ii. Corkscrew motion
         iii. Controlled by
            a. Hormones
            b. Neural stimulation
            c. Stretching
      3. Examples
         i. Digestive tract
         ii. Respiratory tract
         iii. Reproductive tract
         iv. Iris

II. Muscle injuries

III. Muscle disorders