Making an outline can help you to identify and organize ideas before drafting. The following are some considerations for creating and using outlines.

Before You Start

*Establishing your purpose and structure*
An outline helps you meet the requirements of your assignment. Read your instructor’s guidelines carefully before making your outline. What type of paper are you to write? Has your instructor described a structure you are to follow? Who is your audience? How familiar is your audience with your topic—will you need to provide background on the topic and define key terms?

*Developing your “working thesis”*
Establish your thesis—the main idea governing your paper. The outline will help to organize your ideas for supporting your thesis. Remember that your thesis at this point is a “working thesis” and may be modified as your writing process moves forward.

Creating the Outline

*Varieties of outlines*
Outlines may be formal or informal. Informal outlines, effective for shorter papers, may be formatted in any manner you choose—with bullet points, dashes, or the like. Formal outlines use Roman numerals, capitalized letters, Arabic numerals, and lower-case letters. Longer writing projects often require writers to use more formal outlining. Remember that the purpose of an outline is to organize your ideas before you draft, so select the variety that best suits your needs and the complexity of the project.

*Informal outlines*
If you are working on a short writing assignment, an informal outline listing your major points and a brief description of your support for each point might be all you need to organize your thoughts before drafting:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thesis: The three-part structure of “To Autumn” allows Keats to show both the distinct phases of autumn and the season’s continuity within the larger cycle of nature.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>--Briefly define Romantic nature poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--Introduce “To Autumn” (three-part structure)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--1st stanza: late summer/fruitfulness/Sept.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--2nd stanza: harvest time/Oct.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--3rd stanza: end of season/onset of winter/Nov.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--Season’s beauty softens the images of death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--Death and cycle of nature; hints of renewal and return</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(from *The Borzoi Handbook for Writers, 3rd ed.*, p. 31)
**Formal Outlines**

If your project is longer and more complicated, you may want to use a formal outline, which is useful for organizing and subordinating your ideas, examples, and evidence. In the examples that follow, notice the writer’s subordination strategy for each subtopic and the supporting ideas. Supporting ideas provide evidence and examples for the subtopics, and all of the subtopics provide support for the thesis. This type of organization will help ensure that each of your paragraphs is focused and developed and that the main idea of your paper is fully supported.

A formal outline can be written in either topic or sentence form. Topic outlines use single words or phrases. Entries in the sentence outline are written in complete sentences. The following examples are from *The McGraw Hill Handbook*, 2nd edition, by Maimon, Peritz, and Yancey, pp. 48-49.

Notice that both outlines work from the same thesis and organizational plan. But the topic outline uses brief wording while entries in the sentence outline are expressed as complete thoughts. Some writers find that sentences in the topic outline, especially the major ideas listed under Roman numerals, can actually serve as topic sentences in the first draft.

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**Formal Topic Outline**

Thesis: Like a photojournalist, Salgado brings us images of newsworthy events, but he goes beyond objective reporting, imparting his compassion for refugees and migrants.

I. Sophistication of Salgado’s photographs
   II. Power of “Orphanage attached to the hospital” photo
      A. Three infant victims of Rwanda War
         1. Label: abstract statistics
         2. Photo: making abstractions real
      B. Documentary vividness and dramatic contrasts of black and white
         1. Black-and-white stripes of blankets
         2. White eyes and dark blankets
         3. Faces
            a. Heart-wrenching look of baby on left
            b. Startled look of baby in center
            c. Glazed and sickly look of baby on right
      C. Intimate vantage point
         1. A parent’s perspective
         2. Stress on innocence and vulnerability
     III. Salgado’s ability to illustrate big issues with intimate images

Using Your Outline

After you have created your outline, you can use the preliminary plan to evaluate the development of your argument. First, evaluate the subtopics as a group to ensure they provide the necessary support and development for your thesis. Repeat the process for each individual subtopic—check to ensure that your evidence and examples provide ample support. Additionally, you should evaluate the order of your subtopics: Why is subtopic one first and three last? Might you create a more effective order? At this stage of the writing process, you might edit your outline, and save some valuable drafting time.