Constructing an Outline

While many students dive right into writing a paper, it is important to take a little time to plan before getting started. Writing an outline can result in a paper that is more focused and better organized. An outline can be formal (such as one you would hand in to a professor) or informal, simple or more complex. The guidelines below are designed for a formal outline but can work for informal ones as well.

Steps in Making a Formal Outline:

1. Decide on the purpose of the paper (e.g., persuasive, analytical) and develop a thesis.
2. Make a list of the ideas and information that you want to include in your paper.
3. Group the points in categories, discarding any that are not relevant.
4. For each group, arrange the items from general topics to specific ideas.
5. Use Roman numerals, capital letters, and Arabic numerals to identify each line based on its importance. (Longer outlines can add lower-case letters.)
6. Avoid using a 1 without a 2, or an A without a B.
7. Use the same grammatical structure for each point at the same level (e.g., all sentences, all noun phrases, all verb phrases).
8. Remember that the outline is only a plan; it can be adapted as you write.

Sample Outline:

I. Introduction (thesis: Public schools should adopt a 12-month schedule.)

II. Problems with current system
   A. Lack of student achievement in many districts
   B. Loss of learning due to long summer break
   C. Underutilization of physical facilities

III. Design of 12-month system
   A. 11 weeks on; 3 weeks off
   B. Staggered scheduling

IV. Advantages
   A. Students
      1. Increased instruction time leading to increased learning
      2. Less need for repeating material forgotten over the summer
   B. Parents
      1. Fewer childcare expenses
      2. Less concern about student summer activities
   C. Teachers
      1. Higher pay
      2. Smaller class size
   D. Community
      1. Less vandalism of school facilities
      2. Less need to build new schools

V. Counterarguments (refutation)
   A. Added expense for school district (less expense for parents; increased income for teachers)
   B. No extended family vacations (vacations possible at other times)
   C. Fewer community programs (more school programs)

VI. Conclusion