

Constructing an Outline

When to use a formal outline

Early in the writing process, rough outlines have certain advantages over their more formal counterparts: They can be produced more quickly, they are more obviously tentative, and they can be revised more easily should the need arise. However, a formal outline may be useful later in the writing process, after you have written a rough draft, especially if your subject matter is complex.

The following formal outline brought order to a research paper on Internet surveillance in the workplace. Notice that the student's thesis is an important part of the outline. Everything else in the outline supports it, directly or indirectly.

Thesis: Although companies often have legitimate concerns that lead them to monitor employees' Internet usage—from expensive security breaches to reduced productivity—the benefits of electronic surveillance are outweighed by its costs to employees' privacy and autonomy.

- I. Although employers have always monitored employees, electronic surveillance is more efficient.
 - A. Employers can gather data in large quantities.
 - B. Electronic surveillance can be continuous.
 - C. Electronic surveillance can be conducted secretly, with keystroke logging programs.
- II. Some experts argue that employers have legitimate reasons to monitor employees' Internet usage.
 - A. Unmonitored employees could accidentally breach security.
 - B. Companies are legally accountable for online actions of employees.
- III. Despite valid concerns, employers should value employee morale and autonomy and avoid creating an atmosphere of distrust.
 - A. Setting the boundaries for employee autonomy is difficult in the wired workplace.
 1. Using the Internet is the most popular way of wasting time at work.
 2. Employers can't tell easily if employees are working or surfing the Web.
 - B. Surveillance can create resentment among employees.
 1. Web surfing can relieve stress, and restricting it can generate tension between managers and workers.
 2. Enforcing Internet usage can seem arbitrary.
- IV. Surveillance may not increase employee productivity and trust may benefit it.
 - A. It shouldn't matter to the company how many hours salaried employees work as long as they get the job done.
 - B. Casual Internet use can actually benefit companies.
 1. The Internet may spark business ideas.
 2. The Internet may suggest ideas about how to operate more efficiently.
- V. Employees' rights to privacy are not well defined by the law.
 - A. Few federal guidelines exist on electronic surveillance.
 - B. Employers and employees are negotiating the boundaries without legal guidance.
 - C. As technological capabilities increase, there will be an increased need to define boundaries.

Guidelines for constructing an outline

1. Put the thesis at the top.
2. Make items at the same level of generality as parallel as possible.
3. Use sentences unless phrases are clear.
4. Use the conventional system of numbers and letters for the levels of generality.

I.
 A.
 B.
 1.
 2.
 a.
 b.

II.

5. Always use at least two subdivisions for a category, since nothing can be divided into fewer than two parts.
6. Limit the number of major sections in the outline; if the list of roman numerals begins to look like a laundry list, find some way of clustering the items into a few major categories with more subcategories.
7. Be flexible; in other words, be prepared to change your outline as your drafts evolve.

Source: *A Writer's Reference*, 6th edition
—Diana Hacker
Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007
Pages 12 – 13.