

ORGANIZING IDEAS & OUTLINING¹

You've come up with a lot of ideas and information, roughed out a thesis statement, and begun thinking about what's important to include, what should be left out, and how the bits you're including relate to each other. At this point – especially if your material is complicated – you need to focus on organizing.

The two tasks of organizing are (1) distinguishing **general** from **specific** ideas and (2) seeing the **relations between** ideas. Group specific points beneath the general points they support. Position the general points in a way that makes sense based on logic or narrative (storytelling) sequence.

Three different strategies for accomplishing these tasks are an *informal outline*, a *tree diagram*, and a *formal outline*. We'll use the same thesis statement to provide examples for all three strategies.

Thesis statement: The mass media present unrealistic images of the United States as a nation of either constant ethnic conflict or untroubled homogeneity.

INFORMAL OUTLINE – includes key general points and the specific evidence supporting the general points.

Images of ethnic conflict in the news

Ethnic gang wars in cities and prisons

Separation of Hispanic families at US-Mexico border

Defaced African American churches and Jewish synagogues

Images of untroubled homogeneity in TV shows and ads

Mainly middle-class people

Mainly attractive, healthy people

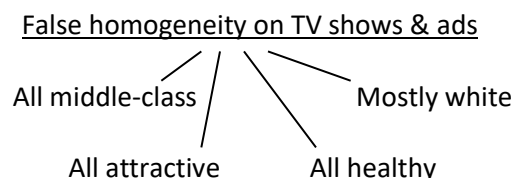
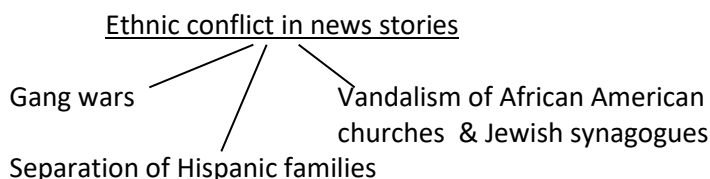
Mainly white people

The reality

Not war, but coexistence among groups

Ethnic groups, poor people, and other groups (missing from TV shows and ads)

TREE DIAGRAM – depicts ideas and details branching out in increasing specificity. A tree diagram is usually handwritten.



What's false about news stories?

Coexistence among groups, not war,
most of the time in most places

What's false about TV homogeneity? – Reality is:

Poor people
Unattractive people
Ethnic groups
Sick and disabled

Formal Outline - The most frequently used type of formal outline is an alphanumeric topic outline based on a thesis statement. Each level must have at least two elements to warrant its creation as it is a subdivision of the level above it.

Title of Document

Thesis: A formal outline provides a logically sequenced structure of equally important elements expressed in a consistent pattern.

- I. First Main Idea**
 - A. Subtopic #1**
 - 1. Detail**
 - a. Impact of detail #1 to thesis**
 - b. Impact of detail #1 to population**
 - 2. Detail**
 - a. Impact of detail #2 to thesis**
 - b. Impact of detail #2 to population**
 - B. Subtopic #2**
- II. Second Main Idea...etc.**

Roman numerals are the highest level of division, followed by capital letters, and then Arabic numerals and finally lower-case letters. In a topic outline, all entries are brief phrases, and consistent in format. Here that is the use of nouns along with a cause/effect format.

One can also choose to make all entries in sentence format, but this is somewhat more tedious to construct as one must be aware of correct grammar and have enough to write about for each and every entry. A full sentence outline may be required for APA format papers, and most often is accompanied by an APA format References list.

As always, follow the directions of your instructor for the type of outline required for a particular assignment and purpose.

¹ Adapted from H. Ramsey Fowler and Jane E. Aaron, *The Little, Brown Handbook*, 11th and 7th Editions. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2007, 1998