

The Standard Topic Outline

What is an outline?

An outline is a plan for your writing. Just as an architect or an engineer makes a plan before beginning construction in order 1) to find the best method of constructing and 2) to make sure that all the different parts will work together, a writer makes an outline 1) to find the clearest way to express the main idea and 2) to make sure that the supporting ideas will work together.

Native speakers use conventional formats so that not only the writer but also the reader can see and understand the whole idea (every part of the main idea's development) easily. If everyone used different formats, seeing and understanding would be more difficult. In the English Language Practicum, we use the "Standard Topic Outline" that is presented below.

Unlike an architect's or engineer's plan, the writer's plan changes as the product (the composition) progresses. It changes because, as the writer gets deeper and deeper into writing and thinks more and more, the writer's ideas change and improve. If the writer is really thinking, therefore, the first outline should be different from the final outline.

How do we make the "standard topic outline"?

1. The structure.

In an outline, the main idea is presented at the very top, without any label. (In a single paragraph, this would be the "topic sentence," and in the multi-paragraph essay it would be the "thesis statement." The main idea may be supported by two or more major ideas; the first major supporting idea is labeled as the capital Roman numeral "I." An idea which explains "I" is labeled as "A." An idea which explains "A" is labeled as the Arabic numeral "1." Then there are "a," "I" (the small Roman numeral), and "a)" (lowercase a with a right parenthesis). Each lower idea level is **indented** further than its higher idea level. (Learn how to use the outline function in your word-processing program. In MS Word, it's called "Outline view.")

Main idea: _____ ("first level," "highest level")

I. _____ ("second level")

A. _____ ("third level")

1. _____ ("fourth level")

a. _____

i. _____

a) _____

2. Make a clear central idea.

ALL of the information in a paragraph should discuss only one thing: one central idea. Know clearly what you want to achieve in your paragraph. You must be conscious of this central idea all the time you are planning the paragraph, in order to avoid including ideas which do not explain the central idea. (At this time you have to start considering "clear focus." You can read about this in the article "Focus: Central idea, purpose, and method.")

3. Put all of your ideas into your outline.

Don't put only your major ideas in your plan, put all of your ideas there. If you do, you can see every part of the development of your main idea at a glance.

4. Establish a pattern for the paragraph.

a. Present the ideas in an order of general to specific. In cultures that use English as the mother tongue, we *usually* present a complex idea in the order of general-to-specific; that is, we **first** present our main point (the general idea), and **then** we present our explanation (the details) of the main point. That's the order that we use in the English Language Practicum classes: We *always* present our main point first, and after that we explain it.

Which of these orders is general-specific, and which is specific-general?

A

That teacher is lousy.

He doesn't know anything.

He comes late to class.

He never gives homework or quizzes.

B

That teacher doesn't know anything.

He comes late to class.

He never gives quizzes or homework.

He's a lousy teacher.

The answer: The order in A is general-specific, and the one in B is specific-general.

b. Choose a pattern that suits your purpose.

Your purpose might be to tell a story (narration), describe something (description), or explain something (see pages 7-9 in *You're in Charge*). Design a pattern that will best help you to achieve your purpose. For example, if you want to explain something by giving a comparison, this might be your pattern:

Topic sentence: Everything about Korea's bus is more sophisticated than in my mother's day.

- I. The bus in my mother's hometown: a country bumpkin
 - A. The bus itself – bad condition
 - 1. made from old oil drums
 - 2. put together in a primitive factory
 - B. The people working on the bus – human atmosphere
 - 1. driver (little skill)
 - 2. bus girl
 - C. The passengers – rustic
 - 1. country folk
 - 2. animals
- II. My hometown: a suave sophisticate
 - A. The bus – good condition
 - 1. made from Pohang steel
 - 2. manufactured in modern factory
 - B. The people working on the bus – automated
 - 1. driver
 - 2. machine and tape replace bus girl
 - C. The passengers: just people – urban

Do you see how I.A and II.A are the same, and how this pattern continues at the next level? Other purposes use other patterns. Be sure to design a pattern which helps the reader see the development of your central idea.

5. Each idea is expressed as a point, not just a topic. Especially if you are going to show someone else your outline (to get the person's opinion or help for your essay), express each idea as a clear point and not as a hint. In the sample outline above, for example, you can see at I.A "the bus itself: bad condition." Most beginning writers will just write the topic "the bus itself," but not tell their *point* about the bus. If you do this, your reader will find it difficult to see what you really want to say.

Sometimes the point is obvious to your reader, and you don't have to write it. For example, for I.B.2 in the sample outline above you don't have to say "bus girl works on the bus," because the higher level idea says "The people working on the bus" and you know that the reader will easily extend "working on" to "bus girl."

Example of an outline

Here is a 4-level (I, A, 1. a.) outline for a paragraph that describes my friends. At first I was going to write about the friends in my neighborhood, but in my first attempt at making a plan (an outline) I realized that the paragraph would be too long; also, when I added the supporting details into my outline I realized that my controlling (main) idea was not correct. So I changed my main idea and then changed my outline (to the one you see below), and then I began to write my paragraph. That is an example of how an outline can help you to 1) improve both your main idea and your supporting ideas, 2) ensure that your whole idea is expressed clearly, and 3) prevent waste of time. Note how each lower level of ideas is indented further and further in (to the right).

<ul style="list-style-type: none">I. formal: stiff<ul style="list-style-type: none">A. encounter situations<ul style="list-style-type: none">1. department meetings2. hallway3. dinnersB. topics of conversation: superficial, impersonal<ul style="list-style-type: none">1. school2. academic3. polite<ul style="list-style-type: none">a. weatherb. current eventsc. cultureII. personal: casual<ul style="list-style-type: none">A. encounter situations<ul style="list-style-type: none">1. home<ul style="list-style-type: none">a. mineb. theirs2. outside the home<ul style="list-style-type: none">a. restaurant or drinking placeb. place of entertainmentc. in natureB. topics of conversation: deep, personal<ul style="list-style-type: none">1. family2. society3. individual	<p>Where friends meet and what they talk about determines whether a friendship is formal or casual. Among my formal friendships are other teachers and some administrators at school. We meet at department meetings, in the hallway, and at official dinners. At these times we talk about matters related to school, what we teach, and other polite topics, such as the weather, current events, and culture. We talk about these things in a rather superficial way so that we do not get too serious. Unlike formal friends, my casual or personal friends meet me at my home or their home, or at a place outside the home. Such outside places are a restaurant or drinking place (most of my friends like to drink), some place of entertainment like the theatre or the movies, or out in nature for hiking or just walking. We talk about personal things, like family and ourselves, and public things, like what is going on in society. Whatever we talk about, however, we do it at a much deeper level than I do with my formal friends. Whether my friends are formal or personal, I enjoy each in his or her own way.</p>
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Exercise 1

In the column on the left are some items that are discussed in a paragraph about Seoul. Can you make an outline out of them? Can you identify any items that would not logically fit in the outline? Use the outline form to the right of the items; write each item at its correct level. After you finish, compare your outline with the paragraph and outline on another page.

Here is the topic sentence: Seoul is an interesting combination of different physical features and variety of population.

Items	Outline
river	I.
ages	A.
natural	1.
origin	2.
old buildings	B.
other countries	1.
old	2.
mountains	B.
physical features	1.
Korea	2.
young	II.
population	A.
man-made	1.
middle-aged	2.
modern buildings	B.
origin	1.
	2.
	3.

Exercise 2

Here are some ideas that the writer will use to explain describe an elephant. To the right of the ideas see if you can provide standard numbering and indentation for each level.

head
trunk
1 meter long
wrinkles
ears
as wide as sails on a ship
flap in the wind
body
as big as a house
round like a blimp

Exercise 3

On a separate sheet of paper, make an outline for this paragraph. Be sure to include all the ideas in your outline, and indent each level. After you make your outline, compare your outline with the outline on another page.

Sungkyunkwan University's campus has two interesting aspects, natural and man-made, which will make you want to visit again and again. One interesting aspect is nature's attractions. In the Sungkyunkwan, the old Confucian shrine and academy, there are two big ginkgo trees which are almost six hundred years old. In back of the university's buildings are hills and woods and a creek where you can go with your sweetheart. Another aspect is the campus's interesting buildings. There are several traditional buildings in the Sungkyunkwan, which were first built at the end of the fourteenth century. In addition to historical buildings, you can see many new buildings. We still have old modern buildings, the administration building and the law college, erected in the 1960s, before many of us were born. A truly modern building, the library, was built at the beginning of the '90s, and the main classroom building was built later, in 1993. And in the twenty-first century we will be able to see a new student union and a new classroom building. If you want to see an interesting combination of natural and human creations, visit Sungkyunkwan University's campus.

Answers for the Outline Exercises

Exercise 1

Seoul is an interesting combination of different physical features and variety of population. Among its physical features are natural wonders and man-made miracles. When we are tired or discouraged we can look up at the mountains or take a walk along the Han River. And the eye is always delighted by many old buildings among many modern buildings. The people who live in Seoul are another reason that it is such an interesting city. The city is cosmopolitan because its citizens come from both Korea and over a hundred other countries. And among all these different kinds of people there is a constantly stimulating tension between young, middle-aged and old. With all these things to see and people to know, how could I ever leave Seoul?

Exercise 2

- I head
 - A. trunk
 - 1. one meter long
 - 2. wrinkles
 - B. ears
 - 1. as wide as sails on a ship
 - 2. flap in the wind
- II body
 - A. as big as a house
 - B. round like a blimp

- I. Seoul's physical features
 - A. natural
 - 1. mountains
 - 2. river
 - B. man-made
 - 1. old buildings
 - 2. modern buildings
- II. Seoul's population
 - A. origin
 - 1. Korea
 - 2. other countries
 - B. ages
 - 1. young
 - 2. middle-aged
 - 3. old

Exercise 3

- I. nature
 - A. SKKU: two ginkgoes (600)
 - B. in back:
 - 1. hills
 - 2. woods
 - 3. creek
- II. buildings
 - A. historical: Sungkyunkwan (14th cent)
 - B. modern
 - 1. old (1960s)
 - a. administration
 - b. law college
 - 2. new (1990's)
 - a. library
 - b. new classroom bldg.
 - 3. under construction
 - a. student union
 - b. classroom bldg.