Developing Outlines

Classification is the primary thought pattern involved in preparing an outline. Developing an outline involves two steps: 1) identifying how ideas relate and 2) grouping ideas together according to their connections. An effective outline, then, accomplishes two things:

1. It shows the relative importance of ideas.
2. It shows the relationship among these ideas.

An outline uses a listing order and a system of indentation as shown below. A quick glance at the outline indicates what is important, what is less important, and how ideas support or explain one another.

Example Outline

Time management
   Analyze your time commitments – hours per week
      Ex: class, part-time job, transportation

Analyze your efficiency
   Notice wasted time, duplication of effort
   Notice time traps
      Ex: making small decisions

Principles of time management
   1. Use of peak periods of concentration
   2. Do difficult tasks first

Suggestions
Here are a few suggestions for developing an effective outline.

- **Concentrate on the relative importance of ideas.** Do not worry about the numbering and lettering system. How you number or letter an idea, or whether you label it at all, is not as important showing what other ideas it supports or explains.
- **Be brief.** Use words and phrases, never complete sentences.
- **Use your own words.** Don’t “lift” most of the material from the text or lecture notes.
- **Make sure subentries are relevant.** All the information you place in sublists beneath a heading should support or explain the heading.
- **Align headings to reflect their relative importance.** Headings with the same indentation on the page should be of equal importance.

How Much Information to Record
Outline notes are particularly appropriate and effective in a number of situations.

- **Difficult material.** Outlining difficult or confusing material forces you to sort ideas, see connections, and express them in your own words and thus aids comprehension.
- **Interpreting and reacting.** When you are asked to write an evaluation, reaction to, or critical interpretation of an article or essay, it is helpful to write a brief outline of the factual content. Your notes will reflect development and progression of thought and help you to analyze the writer’s ideas.
• **Order and process.** In courses where order or process is important, outline notes are particularly useful. In data processing, for example, where sets of programming commands must be performed in a specified sequence, outline notes would organize the information.

• **Classification.** In the natural sciences, in which classifications are important, outlining is a helpful way to record and sort information. In botany, for example, you can use outline notes to list plant subgroups within each botanical category and keep track of similar characteristics.