Outlining

What is an outline?
Think of an outline as another part of the writing process, just like brainstorming, proofreading, and revision. It might interest you to know that I began this mini-course with an outline. An outline is a visual or textual organizational plan for your paper. Outlines are helpful in the brainstorming and planning process, handy for keeping yourself on track while writing, and useful in showing others your ideas.

That last sentence sounded suspiciously like a thesis statement. What's the deal with this writing process thing, anyway?
Many writers perceive that their first draft of a paper is an acceptable final draft; in other words, they feel that they can begin the paper with a vague idea and finish it as something that can be turned in for a grade. This is a very linear method of writing—you begin, you write, and then you're finished. The writing process, though, is not very linear. Rather, the writing process is a continuing cycle of brainstorming, planning, writing, revision, re-writing, sharing, etc. The reason we often push our first drafts into the hands of professors for a grade is because of time issues—we have to meet deadlines, too. Outlining your paper, though, helps writers visualize where they're heading.

So these things help me brainstorm and plan my paper topics?
Yep. Before you even have a certain topic for your paper in mind, you can try brainstorming. Try this: Take a blank sheet of paper (you might even opt for paper without lines) and begin writing down every idea you have related to your paper's subject. For example, if your paper is on Shakespeare, you might write down the following brainstorming questions: when was Shakespeare born, where did he die, how many plays did he write, did he write his plays, what was life in England like at the time, what newspapers did he read, what did he eat for breakfast, did he wear his bathrobe in the morning, what was his cat's name, how long was his--?

Whoa! Don't go there, man.
What? I was going to ponder the length of Shakespeare's sonnet repertoire. The point is that brainstorming gives you an unobstructed visual beginning for outlining. Turn off the censor and think of everything you can. Then pull one or more of those ideas together and decide where to focus your paper. Take a look at the web outline I used for this paper:
Looks great. So I can start writing now, right?
Slow down there, speedy. What are you going to write about?

Well, I brainstormed and picked three ideas, just like you said. It'll make a great five paragraph essay.
So you've got three topics to write about, but what are you going to say about each of them?

I dunno. I'll figure that out when I write the paper.
Okay, but you'll waste a lot of time and effort, not to mention that your paper will probably be bulky and obtuse.

Bulky and what? Are we back to that Shakespeare thing again?
Not quite. But if you wait until you're actually writing the paper to develop your thoughts, you're more than likely to produce a paper full of generalizations. Your paper will resemble a building slapped together without a plan. Using an outline can help you select and focus your thoughts and ideas. You'll be able to begin writing with a clear notion of how each segment fits together, and knowing this will help you write a much better paper.

But if I get so specific with my outline, isn't that like writing my paper twice?
Outlines are like blueprints. Think of an outline as an x-ray of your paper. By using one or two words or phrases to capture the specific ideas you wish to discuss in your paper, you'll keep the paper focused and on track.

Oh! So it helps keep me on track while I'm writing the paper, too!
You got it. Wow, I'm impressed!
Well, I just noticed that was in your thesis statement. Why are you banging your head against the wall?
Never mind.

So what's that last part about? The whole "useful in showing others your ideas" thing?
I'm glad you asked. Sometimes outlines are used formally to show other people the structure of your paper. It helps readers find the information they need quickly, especially with a longer paper. The big visual outlines that are frequently used in brainstorming and planning can be hard for readers to interpret, so formal outlines are usually textual.

*Formal* outlines? Sounds like we're about to discuss rules and regulations.
Anarchy and academia have never mixed well, so yes, we're going to have to discuss the basic rules of a formal outline. Here you go:

1. Have a thesis statement before you start. For help with developing a thesis, see the University Writing Center Mini-course *Steps in Constructing a Thesis Statement* in our front door brochure stand, or visit www.writingcenter.wuc.edu and look for *thesis statements* under *sentence-level concerns*.

2. The different levels in an outline are indicated by different notations and by indentation. See the example at the end of this handout.

3. There is no limit to the number of headings and subheadings in an outline – the number depends on the outline’s purpose. However, whenever you make a heading or a subheading, you must make at least one more at the same level. Thus, you may not have a I. without a II. or an A. without a B.

4. Each heading should contain only one idea.

5. Your outline should spring directly from your thesis statement. For each piece of information in your thesis statement, there should be a heading in your outline.

6. Make sure that all ideas are parallel. The ideas under similar subheadings should be equal in importance. They should also be in the same grammatical form.

7. All subheadings must relate to the main heading of which they are a part.

8. Each point in an outline should be phrased as a statement or phrase, not as a question.

9. Make sure that you indent correctly and put a period after each Roman numeral, letter, or number, except those in parentheses.

10. Capitalize the first letter of the first word in each heading and subheading.
That's great, but are you going to show me what one of these things looks like?
Sure! Here's a sample formal outline for a long paper, based on our example about Shakespeare:

Thesis statement: Shakespeare may have patterned such characters as Dogberry from *Much Ado About Nothing*, Miranda from *The Tempest*, and Hamlet, after members of his own family, namely his father, his daughter Susanna, and his son Hamnet.

I. Shakespeare's Family [first level: main heading]
   A. John Shakespeare [second level: subpoint of I]
      1. Town official and possibly a glove-maker [third level: subpoint of A]
      2. Applied for the right to bear arms and style himself a gentleman [third level: subpoint of A]
      3. Was denied the right to bear arms after a sudden and inexplicable reversal of fortune [third level: subpoint of A]
   B. Susanna Shakespeare [second level: subpoint of I]
      1. Born 6 months into her parents' marriage [third level: subpoint of B]
      2. Became Shakespeare’s preferred daughter—second daughter not mentioned in his will [third level: subpoint of B]
   C. Hamnet Shakespeare
      1. Twin of Judith, Shakespeare's less favored daughter
      2. Died at 11 years of age

II. Shakespeare's Plays
   A. Dogberry [second level: subpoint of II]
      1. A constable--town official [third level: subpoint of A]
      2. Risen from reduced circumstances to a position of honor [third level: subpoint of A]
   B. Miranda [second level: subpoint of II]
      1. Similarity in sound of the names [third level: subpoint of B]
      2. Attitude of Prospero toward his daughter at the end of his life mirrors Shakespeare's at the end of his career [third level: subpoint of B] etc…

Thanks! I feel as if my life has completely changed!
Really?

No, but I’m sure that all this information will help me write my next paper.
I'm glad to be of help.

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