CHAPTER 6:
Step 4
(Organize and Outline)

This chapter covers:
- Organizing: Finalizing Your Purpose Statement and Bottom Line
- The Outline: Why Do I Need One?
- Outlining the Body: Pick a Pattern

After completing the first three steps of the Seven Steps to Effective Communication you are well on your way to an outstanding spoken or written product. Now it’s time to talk about organizing and outlining, the final step in prewriting. A detailed outline helps you arrange your material logically, see relationships between ideas, and serves as a reference point to keep you on target as you write your draft. Think of your outline as the blueprint for your communication product, and realize that the time you spend preparing it will pay off when you start writing sentences and paragraphs.
Organizing: Finalizing Your Purpose Statement and Bottom Line

Why are we talking about a purpose statement again? Didn’t we already determine our “bottom line” back in Step 1? Or did we? Sometimes information uncovered during the research process (Step 2) may point you in an unexpected direction. So do you tweak the data to match your original purpose? No! Now is the time to adjust the vector of your purpose statement to something you can reasonably support and live with.

A thesis statement is a specialized form of purpose statement used in academic or persuasive writing.

The thesis statement captures the author’s point of view on a controversial topic, which he or she defends throughout the paper. A thesis statement is usually finalized after the research process.

You’re less likely to go astray during the outlining process if you write down your purpose statement and refer to it often. Every main point and supporting idea in your outline should support that purpose statement—irrelevant facts or opinions should be eliminated. Discipline at this stage will save pain later.

Organizing: get your bottom line up front (most of the time). In nearly every communication situation, you need to state your bottom line early in the message. In a direct or deductive approach, state your position, main point or purpose up front, then go into the details that support your main point. When you take a direct approach to communication, your audience is better prepared to digest the details of the message and logically make the connections in its own mind.

In the future, authors will take a long time to get to the point. That way the book looks thicker.

—Scott Adams

(The Dilbert Future: Thriving on Stupidity in the 21st Century)

There is an exception to every rule, and you might want to be less direct when trying to persuade a hostile audience. In such a situation, if you state your bottom line up front, you risk turning them off before you build your argument—regardless of how well it is supported. In this case you might consider using an indirect or inductive approach: you may present your support and end with your bottom line. Sometimes this successfully “softens the blow” and gives your audience time to warm up to your views.

In the inductive approach, you still need an introduction, but it would be less direct. Here’s an example of two purpose statements:

**Direct:** Women should be allowed in combat because….

**Indirect:** The issue of women in combat has been hotly debated and both sides have valid points….
Use the inductive approach with caution; it’s an advanced technique and difficult to execute without confusing your audience. In an academic setting, seek your instructor’s advice before applying this method to your assignments.

**The Outline: Why Do I Need One?**

To some people, preparing an outline looks like a chore. Though an outline does take some effort, it’s a time-saver, not a time-waster: an outline organizes your main points and supporting ideas in a logical order. It allows you to see the flow of your ideas on paper without having to write out complete sentences and paragraphs. If the ideas don’t fit together or flow naturally, you can rearrange them without a lot of effort. Like the blueprint of a house, an outline makes the “construction process” efficient and effective—and results in a better quality product.

Does all writing require a detailed outline with several layers of detail? No. If you plan to write a short letter, message or report, a list of main points may be all you need. For longer papers, Air Force publications, reports, staff studies, etc., you’ll find a detailed outline is usually an indispensable aid. The outline then serves as the framework to write well-organized instructions, reports, background or position papers, letters and memorandums.

**Outlining Structure: Three Parts**

Chapter 7 describes how most writing and speaking is organized into three parts: an introduction, a body and a conclusion. Most of the work in developing an outline involves organizing the body of your communication, but if you are building a detailed outline on a lengthy written product, you should probably include the introduction and conclusion in the outline. Skilled communicators writing short, informal assignments may just outline the body and work out the introduction and conclusion during the drafting process.

**Outlining Formats: Headings and Structure Used in Formal Outlines**

Though most outlines you produce will never be seen by anyone else, the logic you develop in an outline will show through in your communications—written or oral. You might also be asked to produce a formal outline for “public consumption” in some cases, such as these scenarios:

- Your boss wants to review what you plan to cover before you start drafting.
- You’re organizing the efforts of multiple writers who must work together.

In these situations, it’s helpful to have a consistent approach to outlining your project. A recent Internet search for outline formats yielded 3.6 million results; however, this handbook embraces only a few. Be consistent once you pick an approach and do your homework to find out if there is a preferred standard for your project.

**Tip:** Turn off the automatic format function of your word processor. Many format headaches can be stopped before they start by disabling the automatic format function.

**Outlining: The Cardinal Rule**

The cardinal rule of outlining: *any topic that is divided must have at least two parts.* Every “1” must have a “2” (and so forth) for every level. Some official publications violate this rule but this does not mean the standard has changed, only that the author did not follow the rule, either by direction or in error.
The Classic Outline Format

The first option for an outline format is to use the classic outline format. The classic outline format uses Arabic numerals and the lower-case Latin alphabet characters in an alternating pattern to identify the different levels of the outline.

**THE CLASSIC OUTLINE FORMAT**

1. Level 1. Classic outline levels are formatted as shown below. Each paragraph is identified with a number or letter element followed by two spaces preceding the content of the paragraph.
   a. Level 2. [5 spaces precede “a.” using Times New Roman (TNR) 12 point font]
      (1) Level 3. [10 spaces precede “(1)” using TNR 12]
       (a) Level 4. [16 spaces precede “(a)” using TNR 12]
       (1) Level 5. [22 spaces precede “1” using TNR 12]
       a Level 6. [26 spaces precede “a” using TNR 12]
       [1] Level 7. [30 spaces precede “[1]” using TNR 12]
       [2] Level 7. Second item required by the cardinal rule of outlining.
       b Level 6. Second item required by the cardinal rule of outlining.
       2 Level 5. Second item required by the cardinal rule of outlining.
       (a) Level 4. Second item required by the cardinal rule of outlining.
   b. Level 2. Second item required by the cardinal rule of outlining.

2. Paragraphs are numbered by alternating Arabic numerals with characters from the Latin alphabet, along with a period, parenthesis, underline or bracket to identify each paragraph.
   a. Each level is indented so that the paragraph number or letter is aligned under the first character in the preceding paragraph. Using Times New Roman 12 point font the spaces preceding each level to create this example are shown in [grey brackets]; however, if the font style or point size changes, the number of spaces will change due to the proportional spacing function of word processing software. **Regardless of the font style or point size, maintaining the alignment of the paragraph number or letter of subordinate paragraphs with the first character of the preceding level is the key.**
   b. The text wraps all the way to left margin for all levels.
   c. Use bold font for main points or headings, as desired.

3. You can organize and subdivide in any number of ways (see “Outlining the Body: Pick a Pattern” latter in this chapter).
   a. Some sections may be more detailed than others resulting in some levels that will be divided while others will not, but remember, the cardinal rule of outlining applies when you do divide: **any topic or outline level that is divided must have at least two parts.**
   b. Most letters and memorandums use no more than three levels and AU-1, the *Air University Style and Author Guide*, recommends no more than three levels for most written work.
   c. Technical works may require more than three levels to maintain clarity and organization.

4. The **Classic Outline Format** is the standard format commonly used by senior Air Force executive staffs (directors of staff, secretaries, executive officers, command chiefs, etc.) and is the format used in official memorandum examples later in this handbook.
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The Numbered Outline Format

The **numbered outline** is directed by Air Force Instruction (AFI) 33-360, *Publications and Forms Management*, for use in Air Force instructions. This format numbers every paragraph, indents each level one-quarter inch from the previous level, and wraps the text to align under the paragraph number. See AFI 33-360, paragraph 6.5.10.1, “Paragraph Numbering,” for further details. The numbered outline format presented here is the final product format for AFIs; see AFI 33-360 for guidance on the format for drafting instructions.

**NUMBERED OUTLINE FORMAT (Reference AFI 33-360, paragraph 6.5.10.1.)**

Chapter 1

1.1. Section 1. [Tip: Each item at a specific level in an outline should begin at the same level of indentation from the left margin (i.e., paragraphs 1.1. and 1.2. have the same indentation.)

   1.1.1. First subheading to paragraph 1.1 [Tip: For each level of detail the paragraph numbers are indented one-quarter inch.]

   1.1.2. Second subheading to paragraph 1.1. [Tip: Narrative text at every level should wrap as in this example—indented from the left to be aligned under the paragraph number.]

      1.1.2.1. First subheading to paragraph 1.1.2. [Tip: Air Force Instructions frequently have levels of detail beyond this level. If possible, avoid too many levels of detail as the paragraph numbers becomes very long and the effectiveness of the system is degraded.]

      1.1.2.2. Second subheading to paragraph 1.1.2. [Tip: Organize content to follow the cardinal rule of outlining: **any topic that is divided must have at least two parts.** Never create a Part 1 without a Part 2, a Section A without a Section B, a Paragraph 1.1.1 without a Paragraph 1.1.2.]

   1.1.3. Third subheading to paragraph 1.1.

1.2. Section 2 of Chapter 1. [and so forth, as above.]

Chapter 2

2.1. Section 1 of Chapter 2.

   2.1.1. First subheading to paragraph 2.1.

      2.1.1.1. First subheading to paragraph 2.1.1

      2.1.1.2. Second subheading to paragraph 2.1.1.

   2.1.2. Second subheading to paragraph 2.1

2.2. Section 2 of Chapter 2. [and so forth, as above.]

The Modern Outline Format

The **modern outline** format is commonly used in Air Force PME courses. The modern outline is based on the *The Chicago Manual of Style* (16th Edition, pages 347-348). The modern outline uses upper- and lower-case Roman numerals as well as upper- and lower-case Latin alphabet and Arabic numbers. Remember to turn off the auto format function of your word processor when creating an outline.
MODERN OUTLINE FORMAT (Based on The Chicago Manual of Style)

I. Level 1. [1 space precedes “I” using TNR 12 to maintain alignment with paragraph “II.” For further information, see paragraph “i)"

A. Level 2. [5 spaces precede “A.” using Times New Roman (TNR) 12 point font]
      a) Level 4. [16 spaces precede “a)” using TNR 12]
         (1) Level 5. [21 spaces precede “(1)” using TNR 12]
            (a) Level 6. Levels are numbered by alternating Arabic numerals with characters from the Latin alphabet, along with a period, parentheses, or brackets to uniquely identify each level [27 spaces precede “(a)” using TNR 12]
               i) Level 7. This is the final outline level of detail available. The Roman numerals are right-aligned (the numerals extend to the left). Right-alignment can be difficult to format and maintain paragraph alignment, especially as the numeral increases; hence, lower-case Roman numerals are reserved for the level least likely to be used. (The same difficulty with right alignment of upper-case Roman numerals exists at Level 1. Often, the Level 1 Roman numerals are reserved for sections or chapters and Level 7 is not used. Some outlines omit all Roman numerals, using Levels 2 through 6 as Levels 1 through 5. [34 spaces]
               ii) Each level is indented so that the paragraph number or letter is aligned under the first character in the preceding paragraph. Using Times New Roman 12 point font the spaces preceding each level to create this example are shown in [grey brackets]; however, if the font style or point size changes, the number of spaces will change due to the proportional spacing function of word processing software (the differences in this example compared to the Classic Outline example are due to differences in paragraph numbers, letters, and the number of parentheses or brackets). Regardless of the font style or point size, maintaining the alignment of the paragraph number or letter of subordinate paragraphs with the first character of the preceding level is the key. [33 spaces]
               iii) Use bold font for main points or headings, as desired. [33 spaces]
               iv) The Chicago Manual of Style suggests that papers not needing seven levels of detail omit Level 1 (upper-case Roman numerals) and Level 2 (upper-case Latin alphabet) and start with the Arabic numerals of Level 3 (1, 2, 3,…). [33 spaces]
                  (b) Level 6. Second item required by the cardinal rule of outlining.
                     (2) Level 5. Second item required by the cardinal rule of outlining.
                        b. Level 4. Second item required by the cardinal rule of outlining.
                           2. Level 3. Second item required by the cardinal rule of outlining.
                              B. Level 2. Second item required by the cardinal rule of outlining.

B. Some sections may be more detailed than others resulting in some levels that will be divided while others will not, but remember, the cardinal rule of outlining applies when you do divide: Any topic or outline level that is divided must have at least two parts.

II. You can organize and subdivide in any number of ways (see “Outlining the Body: Pick a Pattern” latter in this chapter).
   A. Most Air Force letters and memorandums use three levels and the Air University Style and Author Guide recommends no more than three levels for most short documents.
   B. Technical or lengthy documents may require more than three levels to maintain clarity and organization.
Tip: Regardless of which outline format you use, remember that the primary purpose of an outline is to arrange your thoughts into main points and subordinate ideas. The bottom line is that outlining will help you organize content for greater clarity and improved communication. Use the format that helps you achieve better communication.

### Outlining the Body: Pick a Pattern

Your next step is to select a pattern that enables you and your readers to move systematically and logically through your ideas from a beginning to a conclusion. Some of the most common organizational patterns are listed below. Your purpose, the needs of your audience and the nature of your material will influence your choice of pattern.

1. **Topical or Classification Pattern**

   Use this format to present groups of ideas, objects or events by categories. This is a commonly used pattern to present general statements followed by numbered listings of subtopics to support, explain or expand the statements. A topical pattern usually follows some logical order that reflects the nature of the material and the purpose of the communication. For example, if you are giving a briefing on helicopters, you might separate them into light, medium and heavy lift capabilities and briefly describe the weight limits for each category. You could begin with the lightest capability and move to the heaviest or begin with the heaviest and move to the lightest.

   **Tip:** To help your readers absorb complex or unfamiliar material, consider organizing your material to move from the most familiar to the unfamiliar or from the simplest category to the most complex. When using this pattern, experiment to find the arrangement that will be most comfortable for your audience.

2. **Comparison and Contrast Pattern**

   Use this style when you need to discuss similarities and/or differences between topics, concepts or ideas. When you are describing similarities and differences, it often helps the reader to see a point-by-point comparison of the two items. For example, if you were writing a document that compares and contrasts certain characteristics of the F-22 and the F-16, you might go item by item, discussing similarities and differences between the two as you go.

3. **Chronological Pattern**

   When you use this pattern, you discuss events, problems or processes in the sequence of time in which they take place or should take place (past to present or present to future). This pattern is commonly used in writing histories, tracing the evolution of processes, recording problem conditions, and documenting situations that evolve over time. This approach is also used in official biographies, which are written in chronological order because they serve as a history of the member’s professional career.

   This pattern is simple to use, but judgment is required when deciding what events to leave in and what events to leave out. For example, if you were preparing a short biography to introduce a distinguished guest speaker, you may decide to emphasize experiences that demonstrate his subject matter expertise and leave out other important but less relevant details. When unsure what to include, think back to your purpose and audience.
Tip: You may want to consider a chronological approach to your topic when it is known to be controversial. Many writers and speakers will announce, “First let’s take a look at the history of the problem.” This starts the sender and audience out on neutral ground instead of just launching into the issue at hand. This is a type of inductive approach, and again, should be used with caution.

4. Sequential Pattern

The sequential or step-by-step approach is similar to the chronological pattern. Use this approach to describe a sequence of steps necessary to complete a technical procedure or process. Usually the timing of steps is not as important as the specific order in which they are performed. The outline on the first page of this chapter (“Seven Steps to Effective Communication”) is an example of a sequential approach. The sequential approach is often used in manuals and other instruction books. For example, a Security Forces noncommissioned officer (NCO) in charge of small arms training might use this pattern when rewriting the teaching manual on how to safely inspect, load, fire, disassemble and clean weapons. Since safety is paramount, the process must be written in a precise, stepwise fashion to ensure that nothing is overlooked.

Tip: When describing a procedure, explain the importance of sequence so your audience is mentally prepared to pay close attention to the order, not just the content, of the information.

5. Spatial or Geographical Pattern

When using this pattern, you’ll start at some point in space and proceed in sequence to other points. The pattern is based on a directional strategy—north to south, east to west, clockwise or counterclockwise, bottom to top, above and below, etc. Let’s say you are a weather officer briefing pilots about current and anticipated conditions in the geographic region where they will be flying a mission. You would most likely describe conditions in reference to the terrain and describe weather systems that will affect their mission on a map.

Tip: Make sure to use appropriate transitions to indicate spatial relationships: to the left, farther to the left, still farthermost to the left; adjacent to, a short distance away, etc. These signal the flow of the communication; if missing, your audience is easily confused.

6. Problem and Solution Pattern

You can use this pattern to identify and describe a problem and one or more possible solutions, or an issue and possible techniques for resolving the issue. Discuss all facets of the problem—its origin, its characteristics and its impact. When describing the proposed solution, include enough support to convince your readers the solution is practical and cost effective. After presenting your solution, you may want to identify immediate actions required to implement the solution.

The problem and solution pattern may be used in several variations:

- One Solution: Discuss the problem and follow with the single, most logical solution.
- Multiple Solutions: Discuss the problem, several possible solutions, the effects of each and your recommendation.
- Multiple Solutions, Pro-Con: This popular format includes a discussion of the advantages (“Pros”) and disadvantages (“Cons”) of each solution.
Remember that a problem-solution pattern is not a format for a personal attack on an adversary; it’s simply a systematic approach to use in persuading people either to accept your ideas or to modify their own ideas. Note that this example uses the same paragraph headings (purpose, background, discussion, views of others and recommendation) as used in the electronic staff summary sheet (eSSS) discussed later in this handbook.

**Problem and Solution Example: The Staff Study**

The Staff Study format described in chapter 17 is a classic example of a problem and solution pattern. Within this format, you can present several possible solutions or just the one you recommend. A staff study with three options might have an outline that looks like this:

1. **PURPOSE:** (Problem)
2. **BACKGROUND:** (Factors bearing on the problem)
   a. Facts
   b. Assumptions
   c. Evaluation criteria for solutions
3. **DISCUSSION:** (Possible solutions and/or major factors or contentious points)
   a. Option 1: pros and cons
   b. Option 2: pros and cons
   c. Option 3: pros and cons
4. **VIEWS OF OTHERS:** (Consider the views of others so that the package creates buy-in from stakeholders and presents a complete analysis to the decision maker.)
5. **RECOMMENDATION:** (Clearly state in a single sentence what action you recommend to the approving official. Though you can list your options in any order, skilled writers often “save the best for last” and put their recommended option last on the list to help readability.)

**7. Reasoning or Logic Pattern**

In this pattern, you state an opinion and then make your case by providing support for your position. This is the classic “logical argument” described in chapter 5. This approach works well when your goal is more than just discussion of problems and possible solutions. Use this pattern when your mission is to present research that will lead your audience down the path to your point of view!

⚠️ **Tip:** Remember your audience analysis? If members of your audience are hostile to your position, try to look at this issue through their eyes. Start out with the support they are most likely to accept, and then move into the less popular issues that support your main point.
8. Cause and Effect

You can use this pattern to show how one or more ideas, actions or conditions lead to other ideas, actions or conditions. Two variations of this pattern are possible: (1) begin with the effect, then identify the causes; or (2) begin with the causes, then identify the effects. The technique you use depends on the context of your discussion.

**Causes, Effects, and Faulty Logic**

Be careful to avoid faulty logic traps when writing about cause and effect. You’re guilty of a *false cause fallacy* when you assume one event causes a second event merely because it precedes the second event. You’re guilty of a *single cause fallacy* when you assume only one factor caused an outcome, when in fact there are multiple causes. For more details on fallacies, refer back to chapter 5.

Sometimes an effect-to-cause approach is used when your purpose is to identify WHY something happened. When might you use this approach? Let’s say you are the president of the Safety Investigation Board following a fatal aircraft mishap (*the effect*). Your report might begin by describing the mishap itself, and then explain the factors that led up to the mishap and conclude with your determination of one or more *causes* for the effect.

Sometimes a cause-to-effect pattern is used when your purpose is to explain HOW current actions or conditions (causes) may produce future consequences (effects). For example, someone might use this pattern to present how a series of causes—larger automobiles, reduced financial incentives for energy conservation and reduced research funding for alternative energy technologies—might result in an undesirable effect—a US shortage of fossil fuels.

**SUMMARY:** A well-planned outline can ease the pain of writing your first draft. Remember, building a house is much easier with a blueprint! This invaluable tool will help you remain focused on your purpose statement and help ensure your support is organized, relevant and tailored to your mission and audience. The outline will also help in the editing process. Take a break after working on your outline and start fresh before you begin your draft. Good luck!