



OUTLINING TIPS AND TECHNIQUES FOR CLASS¹

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Outlining may be useful because it can help to ensure that you review the course material from the entire semester. While you review and prepare your outline, you may be alerted to gaps in your class notes or weaknesses in your grasp of the class concepts. Formulating an outline may enable you to see the “big picture” of the concepts and skills that your professor is teaching in the course. And creating your own personal outline may offer you the chance to “own” the material and organize it in the manner most accessible to you.

The purpose of this document is to demonstrate some of the techniques that may be used when you construct class outlines for exams. Outlining is an extremely personal process; no two people outline alike. Some people even choose not to outline. As such, this document is not comprehensive or demonstrative; rather this document serves as a resource guide. If you decide to outline for your exams, this document should provide substantive advice and answer some of your questions about the outlining process.

Getting Started

No matter what form of outline you decide to create, you first need to choose the right materials to help you as you begin your review. Begin by gathering all of your course materials. These materials at a minimum should include your course book and your notes from reading and class. But they might also include other materials like your professor’s handouts, commercial study aids, and model outlines.

1. Consider Using Model Outlines

A model outline is an outline that someone else made for the same class and the same professor, in a previous year. To find a model outline, use your resources; on campus, contact friends, peer advisors, law fellows, journal members, and club offices. For instance, you might browse the Student Bar Association online outline database.

If you cannot find a model outline, do not worry. And if you choose not to use a model outline as a guide, do not feel disadvantaged. Using model outlines is only one technique used to

¹ By Alexis Martin and Jennifer Bennett. Revised by Felicia Mitchell in 2009

create an effective course outline. Remember to be successful on exams, you need to apply the concepts that your professor has taught you. And regardless of the outlining method that you use, you can be successful.

2. Create the Framework for Your Outline

When you begin creating your outline, consider developing the framework of the outline first. Organizing a structure before you begin to write may help you to see the big picture of the course and to discover any class notes you may be missing. To do this, write down the main points or sections of your outline before filling in any detail from your notes. Your main points should be broad, general points. For example, your torts outline might have five main points, such as: Intentional Torts, Unintentional Torts, Vicarious Liability, Strict Liability, and Products Liability. These main point headings will then help to guide the rest of the outline. And they can be ordered in a variety of ways, such as: your understanding of the material, the manner in which the material was presented, or any other order that makes sense to you.

a. Determine the Main Points of Your Framework

You can determine the main points that will become the framework of the outline by using different methods.

One option is to ***use your course syllabus*** to create the framework of your outline. Some professors give out syllabi in outline form. If you are lucky enough to get a syllabus organized in outline form, it is often an effective framework for your outline because it is organized in the exact manner that you learned the material and in the exact manner your professor understands the material. However if the way the material was presented in class seems awkward to you, feel free to use another approach.

A second option when creating your framework is to ***use your textbook***. You can use the table of contents of your book and use those main headings that you discussed in class or were assigned for reading to fill in your framework.

If you decide to ***use a model outline***, it can be a good tool to help you create the framework for your outline. Once you read through the model outline, determine whether the large headings are structured in the way either that you thought the course was structured, or that is understandable to you, and use the points that work for you.

Most importantly, do not discount your own ability; ***use your brain***. Your own knowledge and understanding is the best tool to help create your outline. Think about the course material, and determine how it makes the most sense to you. This method is probably the best way for you to internalize and process all of the material during your review, but it may take the longest time. Perhaps initially try to create your outline from scratch, but if you find that you are suffering from writer's block and are just staring at the computer screen or paper, then try one of the other methods so that you can get started.

b. Organize Your Framework

Once you have listed your main headings, look at the overall organizational structure and make sure it is best for you. Feel free to reorganize the main points in your framework so that the material for the course makes sense to you. The organization in your syllabus, textbook, or model outlines might not be well organized, so you should be sure to come up with the organization that works for you. For instance, some students organize their outlines on substantive black letter law, others focus on procedural steps, whereas some choose to combine both approaches.

3. Chose the Most Appropriate Outline Format for You

After you have developed your framework, you should choose an outline format that is right for your learning style. There is no one format to use when outlining; there are a number of different styles. While you may be most familiar with the traditional outline format (e.g. a Roman numeral numbered list), do not be afraid to try other formats like charts, diagrams, or flash cards. The Office of the Dean of Students has additional resources available in its “Maximizing Learning” series that can provide examples of the formats that students have used in the past.²

Filling in the Details

Now that you have the framework for your outline, you can begin thinking about the details of the course. Consider the big picture that you created in the framework. Next, think about any overarching themes that tie your main points together. These themes may not be just black letter substantive law; you might also include information about policy, economic theory, or legislative history. Use your book, notes, study aids, and other materials for assistance. Your professor’s old exams can be useful tools because it can help you to focus on the material that your professor might test. Give yourself time to really think about all of this information because this is the part of the outlining process where most of your learning takes place. From the major sections, you can continue to put information in your outline that gets more and more specific.

In a tort outline like the example mentioned above, the main headings are substantively similar because each is a category of tort actions. If you wanted to organize your outline based on black letter law, you might begin filling in details by writing in the elements that comprise each category of tort action. For instance, four elements must be proven to recover on a negligence claim: the defendant must have a *duty* that she breached, and the *breach* of that duty must *cause* a plaintiff *injury*. Hence under the negligence category, you could list: Duty, Breach, Causation, and Injury. From this point, you might begin to organize your outline based on specific negligence claims (like per se negligence or breach of a fiduciary duty) and continue to fill in the details with specific rules and case references related to each of the four elements that have to be satisfied in the claim.

² See Georgetown Law Maximizing Learning in Law School – Continuing Orientation Program, <http://www.law.georgetown.edu/students/continuingOrientation.html> (last visited Apr. 27, 2009).

Using Your Finished Outline

Even if you have an *open book* exam, you should know your outline before you sit for the exam. In addition to having a detailed outline, you might create an exam outline, which is a shorter version of your big outline. The exam outline will highlight the major points of your big outline and trigger you to remember the detail from that outline. And as you condense your larger outline into a shorter version, you may find that you learn the information better. At the very least, consider creating a table of contents for your big outline so that you can navigate through it easily as you take your exam.

Do not expect that you will have time to look at your outline during your exam, so you should make sure that you can recall the information easily if you are under time constraints. However, you should bring your outline to the exam. In case you do have time, you can use your outline as a checklist for writing your exam answers. After you have written your answers, you can look through your outline and reassure yourself that you have hit every point.

If your exam is *closed book*, it is even more imperative that you know your outline. Yes, outlining for a course where you will have a closed book exam is useful because outlining is a learning tool. When creating your outline, consider using mnemonic devices to help you recall difficult information. Try to read your outline over until you feel comfortable that you understand and have internalized all of the points. Use your outline to take some practice exams, but be sure to take at least one practice exam without it.

Commonly Asked Questions

Should you outline?

Outlining is not the preferred method of study for some students; if that is you, do not feel obligated to outline. For some students, learning comes from the act of retyping their class notes or by rereading notes from class and reflecting on the class discussion. You should assess your own learning style and decide whether outlining will be helpful for you.

When should you start outlining?

Some students like to start outlining at the beginning of the semester as a method of review. They may begin outlining once the professor has finished discussing one section of the course syllabus. Other students begin once they are able to see the big picture concepts of the course, which may cause them to begin outlining later in the course. They begin once they can predict where the course is going or once they have a sound understanding of what the course has already covered. Some students use the outlining process as a comparison tool; they begin outlining at the beginning of the semester and look at their reading notes and draft portions of their outline before class to compare their outline with what is covered in class.

When deciding when to begin outlining, you should consider how many exams you have to prepare for and whether you will be outlining for each. Your time constraints may guide your

decision on when to start outlining more than any other factor. Many people like to start outlining first semester during the first week in November because most of the course material has been presented at that point and the remaining material will require minimal additional effort to include in the outline. However, many successful exam-takers start outlining over Thanksgiving break, when they have a block of uninterrupted time.

Should you use an electronic outline and what outlining software programs are available?

Your professor will determine what materials you can access during your exam. Ask your professor to find out what his or her rules are; some professors will not allow students to access their computer hard drives during the exam. When allowed, you might use an electronic version of your outline because you can use the search feature in the document software to easily find specific information. But you may be able to achieve similar ease in navigation by printing a hardcopy of your outline and tabbing pages or creating a table of contents.

There are a number of computer software resources available that might help you while outlining. Though most students rely on basic word processing programs, you could consider using spreadsheet programs, diagram programs, or even presentation programs depending on the format of outline that you want to create. Some students purchase note taking software and find it very helpful. But, before you invest money into purchasing a new software program, be sure that you know the capabilities of the programs that you already own because you may not need to buy something new.

Should you include case names or statutes?

Yes, include case names and statute references if that will help you to understand the concepts that the case or statute stand for. It may also be a good idea to note seminal cases that your professor emphasizes and to refer to specific authority if your class is heavily case or statute oriented. However, do not feel obliged to include case names or statutory provisions in your outline if you do not feel it will help you to learn the material. Use your professor's teaching and testing style as a guide for determining what is best. Ask your professor whether he or she will expect your exam analysis to reference the cases covered in class.

How long should your outline be and how long should it take?

Your outline should be long enough to convey all of the information that you should know for the exam. The depth of the information that you should include in your outline should mirror the amount of information that your professor has covered in class or assigned in reading. When you are filling in information on a particular topic in your outline, you might consider how much time your professor devoted to covering that material. That information might help you gauge the degree of specificity needed for your outline and areas of importance in the course, although note that this gauge is not perfect.

Preparing your outline should take you as long as it takes to learn all of that information. You may be able prepare an outline in one day by using a model outline and typing information from it. And while you may learn by reviewing just that, you will likely learn much more if spend a week or two preparing your outline and carefully considering and reviewing each piece of information that you include in it.

When should you be done and how do you know when you are done?

There is no magical day to be done with the outline; you are done outlining when you have carefully considered and sifted all of the information that relates to each of your main point headings. Some students will be outlining right up until the day of the exam. Ideally, you will want to finish outlining with enough time that you can read over your outline a couple of times, create a shorter outline, and take a few practice exams using your outlines.