Outline for research paper

The point of producing an outline is to help you structure your argument in advance. The keynote here is organization: you don’t want simply to list your claims, but to think through the trajectory of your argument. Do you want to begin by providing historical context or to provide it as needed as you go? Do you want to start by citing examples of critics with whom you disagree? Do you need to tell us something about this non-canonical work with which we readers might not be familiar? Does your argument work by establishing a major point and then refining on it? Does it offer a set of sub-arguments that will ultimately add up to your larger thesis?

Write up the outline in the following fashion. State your thesis at the top of the page and then show, using a standard outline format, how you would arrange your argument.

Example:

Thesis: In his poem “Simon Lee,” Wordsworth combines lyric and ballad, two modes that would generally be considered antithetical to each other, in order to demonstrate that lyric contemplation can take a popular form.

1. The poem has many of the features of a ballad
   1. It uses a stanza form very similar to a ballad . . .
   2. It criticizes contemporary social structures
      1. It reveals the cost of the loss of traditional patronage by showing that Simon has found himself without help when he needs it most . . .
      2. It suggests that relations forged by generosity on one side and gratitude on the other have become rare . . .
2. But it also has lyric features
   1. When the speaker breaks in to the poem he becomes its focus . . .
   2. The speaker’s final remarks lead us to wonder about his own feelings . . .

C. Wordsworth combines the two because . . .

and so on . . .

The particular disposition of sections and subsections will depend upon your argument. Bear in mind that whereas an outline made for your own reference need only be comprehensible to you, this one needs to be comprehensible to me. State your claims concisely, but include enough information to enable me to understand them.