

Reverse Outlines

Reverse outlining is a helpful tool in the essayist's arsenal, useful when tackling the revision process which follows after every draft. Like other outlining techniques, the reverse outline's purpose is to organize paragraphs around focused topics, but it takes place during the revision phase of writing instead of the pre-writing phase.

The reverse outline helps the writer make sure their paragraphs have a clear topic and are ordered logically. You can also see if and where you veer off topic, or whether you move from one point to the next too quickly. Let's take a look at the process.

Steps to creating a reverse outline

1. Begin with your draft and a new sheet of paper (or a new, blank document file).
2. On the new sheet of paper, write your thesis or main point (this could be your research question or the main idea you want your paper to get across to a reader).
3. Below your main point, write a number for each paragraph, from 1 for your introductory paragraph, 2 for your second paragraph and so on, through to your final paragraph.
4. Beside each paragraph number, summarize what the paragraph is about in one sentence, and write what the paragraph does to support the thesis.
5. Do this for each paragraph, and note when a paragraph covers more than one topic or when you're not sure how a paragraph supports your thesis.
6. Once you've written a short summary statement for each paragraph and a sentence or two about how it supports your thesis, go back and note where the page breaks are. For example, write or type "Page 1" beside your summary statement for paragraph 1. Then note at which paragraph Page 2 begins. Write that down in your outline. Continue doing this for all page breaks in your paper. We will use this information later to determine if the length of your paragraphs is appropriate.

How to use your reverse outline

Now you have an outline that shows your main point, pages, and paragraph numbers with summaries and connections to your thesis. Using this "map" of your paper, ask yourself the following questions:

Was it difficult for you to connect a paragraph to your thesis?

If it's difficult to see how a paragraph relates to the main idea of the paper, take a closer look at the paragraph in your draft. Have you veered off-point and perhaps written something that doesn't belong in your paper? Or perhaps you just need to better explain how the idea in the paragraph relates to the rest of the work.

Are your paragraph summaries short—were you able to capture what the paragraph was about in a single, short sentence?

If a paragraph was difficult to summarize with a short sentence, its main point might be unclear. If this is the case, write down the point you'd *like* that paragraph to make, and revise the paragraph to say that.

Do any of the paragraphs contain multiple points?

If one paragraph is trying to cover multiple points, it might be difficult for a reader to follow. Break the paragraph where you see yourself shifting topics, and devote a paragraph to each point/topic.

Is the order of your paragraphs logical?

Read each summary, in order, to be sure that your ideas, as you've organized them in your paper, are the clearest they can be. Sometimes, drafts will contain our ideas more in the order that we had them, rather than in the most persuasive or most logical order.

Do you have any pages that contain too many or too few paragraphs?

By noting the page breaks, you can see about how many paragraphs are on each page. If you have a page with many small paragraphs, reread that page to see if any of those short paragraphs need additional development (more supporting evidence from sources, or more discussion and analysis from you). If you have a full page of writing that contains just one or one-and-a-half paragraphs, check that the longer paragraph isn't something that contains too many different ideas. Look for topic changes in the paragraph, and break the paragraph to begin a new one at that location.

Conclusion

Now it's time to revise based on what you learned from your reverse outline. We hope this process will help you strengthen the focus, support, and organization of your essay!