

How to Make a Reverse Outline

A reverse outline is a very useful tool for identifying problems with organization, balance, and flow as you revise drafts of a paper. The following handout is intended to guide you through the process. You can use the layout on this handout to create your outline, or you can make your own on another sheet of paper (or on your computer). Remember: there is no ‘correct’ way to revise – do what works best for you!

Step #1: Identify your thesis and write it below.

Step #2: Record the topic sentences for each of your body paragraphs, then summarize the content/purpose of each paragraph.

Topic Sentence: _____

Purpose: (ex. “Explain why logging is a threat to wolverine habitat”)

Topic Sentence: _____

Purpose:

Topic Sentence: _____

Purpose:

Continue until you have accounted for all the body paragraphs in your paper.

TIPS FOR REVERSE OUTLINING

- For the purposes of this exercise, a “topic sentence” is the first sentence in a paragraph. In the final draft of your paper, these should clearly signal the purpose/information in the paragraph.
- A reverse outline is a diagnosis, not a cure; don’t worry if yours is messy or confusing – you need to honestly identify problem areas in order to fix them.
- Read each paragraph carefully and make sure your summary accounts for all the information it contains.
 - If a paragraph seems to have more than one purpose, or contain too much information, that’s okay – just make note of it.
 - If a paragraph does not have enough information or needs expansion – make note of it.
- Finish your whole reverse outline before you start revising; you want to make sure all the pieces of your paper fit together.

USING A REVERSE OUTLINE TO REVISE

After you’ve made your reverse outline, you can use it to help you diagnose problems with your argument, flow, balance and organization. You can do this in multiple ways, the following are some suggestions:

- **Compare the purpose/content of each paragraph to your thesis.** Ideally, each paragraph should play a clear role in support of your thesis. If one or two paragraphs seem extraneous or irrelevant, consider revising or deleting them. If the majority of your paragraphs seem irrelevant, consider revising your thesis.
- **Look for “problem” paragraphs.** Take a second look at the paragraphs that seemed to contain too much or too little information during the outlining process. Take the time to re-write or re-organize those paragraphs, and then add that new information to your outline.
- **Consider the balance and focus of your paper.** Does the balance of your paper align with the balance of your thesis? For instance: does your thesis imply that you will give three ideas equal weight, but the first 2/3 of your paper discusses only one of those ideas? In these cases, it’s often easier to change the focus of your thesis than to add additional content to your essay.
- **Move paragraphs into a more logical, rhetorically effective order.** Once you are happy with the content of your paragraphs, think critically about the order in which they appear. Does the organization lead your reader logically through your argument? In what order will it be most effective to present the information to your reader?
- **Check the content of each paragraph against its topic sentence.** Now is the time to make sure that the topic sentences of each paragraph clearly point the reader to the information contained in that paragraph.
- **Check your topic sentences against your thesis.** Once you’ve revised your topic sentences, you might want to go back and compare them to your thesis: does each topic sentence clearly show a relationship to the thesis?
- **Check the transitions between paragraphs.** Strong topic sentences are often the best transitions. Use your topic sentences to demonstrate the relationship between the ideas in your paragraphs.