

Using Reverse Outlines to Revise

What is a Reverse Outline?

Similar to creating an outline before drafting a paper, reverse outlining is a revision strategy where writers create an outline *after drafting* based on the content in the current draft. Reverse outlining enables writers to assess each paragraph's main point at a glance as they think about structural, big-picture revision.

How to Make a Reverse Outline?

1. On the side of a blank page or in the margins of your existing draft, put heading labels for each paragraph: ¶ 1, ¶ 2, and so forth.
2. Begin rereading the draft one paragraph at a time.
3. Summarize the main idea of each paragraph in a quick phrase. What is each paragraph about? What does it say?
4. Then summarize the purpose of each paragraph in a second quick phrase. What does each paragraph do for your argument?

Your Reverse Outline May Look Something Like This:

Paragraph Number	Content (Says)	Purpose (Does)
¶ 1	About the idea of reverse outlines	Contextualizes term and establishes purpose
¶ 2	“How-to” steps	Shows how simple/easy the tactic is

How Can a Reverse Outline Be Helpful?

Developing and consulting a reverse outline can help a writer:

- Identify the main ideas in each paragraph
- Assess the global organization of the paper (i.e., are your paragraphs in a logical order?)
- Strengthen transitions between paragraphs (i.e., how can you get from one idea to the next?)
- Recognize if body paragraphs do not connect to the thesis
- Identify redundant or misplaced ideas (e.g., if you revisit the same topic or purpose in paragraph 2, but also in paragraph 7)
- Determine if certain topics or ideas are undersupported or over supported (e.g., if you spend 3 paragraphs on one point of your thesis, but only 1 on another)
- Ensure the content of the paper meets the writing requirements

Additional Notes

- If you have trouble quickly summarizing a paragraph's main idea, it may be a sign of unclear or too many ideas in a paragraph.
- When determining the purpose of each paragraph, start with lines like:
 - The point I want to make here is...
 - This paragraph develops my thesis by...
- If it's difficult to determine the purpose of a paragraph, try to think how to strengthen that paragraph's connection to your thesis or to refine that paragraph's role in your paper.



University Writing Center

Visit the UWC's "Writing Guides and Handouts" page for more writing resources,
www.jmu.edu/uwc/internal/link_library.html

#	Content (Says)	Purpose (Does)
¶ 1		
¶ 2		
¶ 3		
¶ 4		
¶ 5		
¶ 6		
¶ 7		
¶ 8		