

Reverse Outlining

APSU Writing Center Handout

Reverse outline is the process of creating an outline after you've written a draft. It helps you quickly visualize your paper's structure and identify areas to revise. For every paragraph, write its main idea in a few words or one sentence.

Benefits of Reverse Outlining

- Spot missing information or unsupported claims
- Eliminate irrelevant or repetitive content
- Strengthen connections to your thesis
- Improve paragraph focus and development
- Reorganize ideas for stronger flow

How to Create a Reverse Outline

Check Your Thesis Statement

- Summarize your entire paper in one sentence to see if it aligns with your thesis statement.

Check Paragraph Focus & Relevance

- Number each paragraph and write a one-sentence summary of its main idea.
- Questions to answer:
 - Does the paragraph have a clear main idea?
 - Are there multiple ideas packed into one paragraph?
 - Does the paragraph support the thesis?
 - Is the topic sentence strong and specific?

Check the Essay's Organization

- Review the order and structure of your paragraphs to ensure your ideas flow logically and support your thesis effectively.

Questions to answer:

- Are similar topics grouped together?
- Would a different structure work better (chronological, cause/effect, strongest to weakest)?
- Are any key ideas missing?
- Is one idea over-discussed while others are underdeveloped?
- Do your transitions help readers follow your logic?

Reverse Outlining While Reading

- After each paragraph, write a 4–10-word summary in the margin or on a separate page.

Questions to answer:

- What's the main point of this paragraph?
- Do I agree or disagree?
- How does this relate to my research or argument?
- Can I use this organizational structure in my own writing?

Write the main idea of each paragraph in 1 sentence.

- Paragraph 1:
- Paragraph 2:
- Paragraph 3:

- Paragraph 4:
- Paragraph 5:

- Does each paragraph clearly support the thesis?
- Is the order of ideas logical and effective?
- Are there any gaps or redundant points?
- Does each topic sentence reflect the main idea of the paragraph?

References

George Mason University Writing Center. (2024). Reverse outlining. George Mason University.

<https://writingcenter.gmu.edu/writing-resources/writing-as-process/reverse-outlining>

Kennesaw State University Writing Center. (n.d.). Reverse outlining [PDF].

https://writingcenter.kennesaw.edu/resources/REVERSE_OUTLINING%20Accessible.pdf

University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center. (2012, August). Reverse outlines.

<https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/reverseoutlines/>