



## REVERSE OUTLINING GUIDE

### OVERVIEW

Reverse Outlining is a method that helps a writer edit, reorganize and streamline their writing.

**Reverse outlining involves using outlining techniques *after* you have already written text.**

Using a reverse outline, you (the writer) place yourself in the reader's position and look at the flow of what you have. Reverse outlining is a tool that can be used at varying stages of the writing process and from everything from a sentence to a dissertation. You may even be using elements of this technique already!

### WHY USE REVERSE OUTLINING?

It can help you determine:

- If a given section is *actually* saying what you thought you were saying
- If your points are clear and presented in the correct order
- Whether the argument supports your thesis
- Whether important ideas are buried within a paragraph
- The direction that you should go with your draft
- The gaps in your argument
- Your paper is actually arguing for a different thesis, or is making a different argument than you originally intended
- You might even prefer your new argument/thesis! ...Or not.
- Either way, your reverse-outline can help you rework the paper accordingly

### HOW TO REVERSE OUTLINE

There are different ways to approach reverse outlining but all involve similar steps. You can use all of these steps or choose which make sense given where you are in the writing process.

1. Number the paragraphs
2. Identify the topic or purpose of each paragraph
3. Put these topics into an outline form
4. Analyze this outline
5. Create a revised outline
6. Reorganize the text according to the revised outline
7. Check for cohesion

You can also do this on a sentence level within each individual paragraph



### Tips for a Dissertation, Thesis, Article, or subsection:

- In the margins, take brief, pithy notes about what each paragraph/section is doing, in a sentence or two.
- If you can't get a paragraph's/section's claim down to 1-2 short sentences, the paragraph/section might need focusing
- Once you have pithy claims for each section/paragraph, you might notice that the paragraphs want to be rearranged to better make your point
- Pay special attention to how each section advances the paper's argument.
  - Ask:
    - What is the section actually saying?
    - What do you want the section to say?
- Use just the first and last sentence of each paragraph to look at overall flow and cohesion. Can you trace the argument?

### On a Paragraph

- Use the actual individual sentences and set them up in an outline
- Ask: Does each sentence support the topic sentence of the paragraph?
- Put aside any that do not and place them elsewhere in the draft
- Often, when we first write a draft, we write through our thoughts and end up putting the information we would want as a reader at the end of a paragraph rather than the beginning

### On a Sentence

- Pull out any subclauses
- Ask: Does your sentence make sense without them?
- Revise and place the clauses back in as needed to define the basic sentence.

### ADDITIONAL TIPS

- Reverse Outlining is a way to mine your free writing or zero drafting for ideas.
- Use a hard copy to enable you to more easily annotate
- If you use Scrivener as your writing software, Reverse Outlining is particularly easy as you can use the different views to look at your material

REVERSE OUTLINING REQUIRES YOU TO BE IN THE POSITION OF READER NOT JUST WRITER

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Reverse Outlining: An Exercise for Taking Notes and Revising Your Work](#)  
From the Purdue OWL
- [Reverse Outline: What is it and how do I use it?](#)  
From the Fred Meijer Center for Writing & Michigan Authors