
Reverse Outlining

Reverse outlining is a useful skill that you can use in two major ways: (1) as a writer, to clarify your own draft and (2) to take notes on text(s) as you are reading.

What is reverse outlining?

Reverse outlining is simply making an outline AFTER an essay has been written. For every paragraph, write the main idea or main argument in a small number of words in the margin next to that paragraph. This process allows you to see the structure or progress of an essay in a quick and clear way.

As a step in your paper-writing process:

Reverse outlining is a great step to take once you've completed a first draft and are ready to begin the revision process. While you are creating your reverse outline for your own paper, keep these thoughts in mind:

- **Am I able to extract one main idea or one main argument from each paragraph?** If you find that there is no main idea, then your paragraph is probably just “fluff” or unnecessary—or might need some connections or clarity. If you are finding more than one main idea, you will need to break the paragraph up into two or more paragraphs.
- **Is the progression of the ideas logical?** For example: Maybe your first body paragraph talks about how to address the problem of homelessness, but then the second paragraph gives a background of homelessness in your area. It would make more sense to switch the two paragraphs.
- **Does every paragraph summary relate back to the thesis?** If you have ideas that don't fall under the jurisdiction of the thesis, then you either need to expand your thesis or the paragraph is off-topic and needs to be cut. Or perhaps your paragraph needs another sentence or two to be effectively and explicitly connected to your thesis.
- **Did I answer the prompt fully?** Once you can see all of your main points laid out, you can see more fully if you answered every part of the prompt. For example, maybe the prompt asks you to address a counterargument, but after you made your reverse outline, you realize that it isn't to be found in your paper. You will need to add it!

As a note-taking method when reading:

When tackling a large research project, it's easy to get your sources confused or forget what you read about as you move through your research. To keep the ideas you are reading about clear in your mind, create a reverse outline in the margins or on a separate sheet of paper as you read. After each paragraph, write about 4-10 words that summarize the author's main point or idea next to the paragraph. This reverse outline will make it easy to scan over your sources to find information that can be included in your research. Ask yourself these questions as you create your reverse outline:

- **What is the purpose of this paragraph?** If you think of the specific purpose of each paragraph, it can help you uncover the author's main argument in it.
- **Do I agree or disagree with this argument?** Research is all about joining the academic conversation, which means that you are allowed to disagree with what you read. Make a note if you support or are against a particular argument with pluses or minuses beside your summary.
- **How will this fit into my own research?** As you read and take notes, allow the ideas to shape your own argument and also decide if that argument needs to be covered in your own essay.
- **Can I mimic this organization?** Once you have your reverse outline of the source, look over it to see its general structure. Is it a structure that would work well for your own paper? Was it confusing and should therefore be avoided?

Last updated 6/28/2016