

REVERSE OUTLINE

WHAT IS A REVERSE OUTLINE?

A reverse outline is a writing tool used to help organize and structure a piece of writing. Reverse Outlines can only be done after a piece has been partially or fully drafted.

In a reverse outline, the writer removes all supporting details except for the main point/main idea of each paragraph so they can better analyze their writing.

WHY IS A REVERSE OUTLINE HELPFUL?

A reverse outline can help writers who have already started or completed the drafting process to organize, restructure, or edit their work.

Reverse outlines are especially useful to writers looking to analyze a piece they have already written or a draft that does not satisfy key aspects of the assignment or does not meet the expectations of their intended audience. If a writer feels lost, stuck, or like they have run out of things to say, doing a reverse outline may help them gain new insights and approaches to their writing. Reverse outlines are especially useful to writers who need help with the revising stage or who are struggling with coherency/organization.

Reverse Outlines may be particularly useful to writers who

- Prefer getting everything on the page before making revisions
- Struggle with organization or executing logical arguments
- Worry about whether their ideas are expressed clearly or are repeated
- Forget to or do not complete a traditional outline
- Are in the revising stage

Reverse Outlines can help with all (but are not limited to) the following:

- Identifying strengths and weaknesses in the thesis statement or central claim
- Ensuring body paragraphs are relevant to the thesis statement
- Creating, maintaining, and analyzing logical arguments through the paper
- Identifying ideas, reasoning, or evidence that is missing
- Getting unstuck
- Deciding what to cut, add, revise, or edit in a fully- or partially-written essay

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HOW TO DO A REVERSE OUTLINE

Reverse outlines should be done in two parts to be as useful as possible. In Step 1, the writer must **create** the reverse outline. In Step 2, the writer must **analyze** the reverse outline they have created.

Step 1: Create the Reverse Outline

On a separate copy of your essay do the following:

1. Select a paragraph or begin with the very first paragraph of your essay
2. Reread the paragraph and pay attention to the main idea/focus of the paragraph
3. Next to each paragraph, write a single sentence summarizing the main idea/focus of the paragraph

Helpful tips

- Label the paragraph with your thesis statement so that when you do Step 2 you can easily compare that main idea to the ideas in your body paragraphs.
- In the summaries, be aware of any evidence or support for each paragraph's main idea. This will help you in Step 2 to analyze the strength of your ideas in each body paragraph.
- If you can't summarize a paragraph, it probably means you have too many ideas! See how you can divide the paragraph so that you have one paragraph for each of your ideas.

Once you have summarized each paragraph, continue to Step 2.

Step 2: Analyze the Reverse Outline

As you analyze each main idea in your reverse outline, consider the following questions to evaluate the quality and organization of your writing:

- How does each main idea contribute to the overall goal of your paper?
 - Are the main ideas of each paragraph clear and easy to understand?
 - Does each idea work together to support the thesis statement/claim? If not, you might need to adjust the information in your paragraph(s) or in your thesis statement/claim.
 - Does the writing satisfy the assignment prompt criteria or your main goal for the paper?
- How does the current organization affect the coherency?
 - Are the main ideas of each paragraph in a logical order? Are you repeating ideas or concepts? How might the sequence of events be improved?
 - Are there any weak or unsupported ideas? Is the reasoning and research sound? What is the cause of the weakness? Perhaps a source is missing or not properly used.
 - Are there any ideas that are missing? Are all the key elements of your research present? Are there any "gaps" in the reasoning/argument? If so, how can they be fixed? Do you need to do more research or add more of your own thoughts and ideas?
 - Are you talking about something too much? Too little? Have you elaborated on key aspects proportionately? If so, how can you balance the amount of information present?

This analysis of your reverse outline should help you decide what you might need to add, cut, rearrange, or revise in your paper. Hopefully you have an idea of what your next step(s) for writing should be!