

Reverse Outlining

WHAT IS A REVERSE OUTLINE?

A regular outline helps you organize your ideas before you write your paper. A reverse outline helps you analyze what you have already written, as the reverse outline is created after your paper has been drafted. It is a revision tool that helps you see the “big picture” of your paper. A reverse outline provides a sketch of your paper to help you determine if your writing is organized, focused, and smoothly transitioned.

HOW DO I CREATE A REVERSE OUTLINE?

Begin by placing a number next to each paragraph of your paper. On a separate sheet of paper, write #1 and list the main point (or points) of the first paragraph. Do so for each paragraph, noting which statement(s) constitute your thesis or purpose in writing the paper. You will then have an overview of your paper’s paragraphs and main points.

HOW DO I ANALYZE MY REVERSE OUTLINE?

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are the paragraphs properly focused or are there multiple ideas within a paragraph? If you have difficulty summing up a paragraph in one or two sentences, there are probably multiple ideas within that paragraph.
- Are there extraneous ideas within a paragraph that can be deleted or moved to another, more pertinent paragraph? Are there unnecessary repetitions throughout the paper?
- When you look at the paper as a whole, does the organization of the paper reflect what you promised in your intro/thesis?
- When you look at the paper as a whole, does the logic of the argument flow well from paragraph to paragraph? Is there important information that should occur earlier in the paper?

After you analyze your reverse outline by answering the above questions, you can begin the revision process to ensure that your ideas are properly organized, clearly focused, and supportive of your thesis.

Reverse Outline Example

Claim: Deinstitutionalizing mental patients in the late twentieth-century led to transforming the “hobo” to the “homeless person.”

Paragraph 1: Introduction

Paragraph 2: The image of the hobo before World War II

Paragraph 3: The image of the homeless person today

Paragraph 4: The effects of deinstitutionalization

Paragraph 5: A history of deinstitutionalization

Paragraph 6: A history of the Depression; how the Depression is both different and similar to the time period of deinstitutionalization; incorrect beliefs about the causes and timeframe of deinstitutionalization

Paragraph 7: The Reagan administration's policies on deinstitutionalization

Paragraph 8: The realities of life as a "homeless person" contrasted to the romantic notions of "riding the rails"

Paragraph 9: Conclusion*

*Duke University Writing Studio. March 2009

The reverse outline provides a sketch of the paragraphs and the main points of the paper. Now apply the following questions:

- **Are the paragraphs properly focused or are there multiple ideas within a paragraph?**

⇒ Paragraph 6 contains multiple ideas, too many for a single paragraph. Each of the ideas can be separated into different paragraphs.

- **Are there extraneous ideas within a paragraph that can be deleted or moved to another, more pertinent paragraph?**

⇒ Paragraphs 2 and 3 appear to have similar ideas to Paragraph 8. The ideas can be combined and moved closer together to strengthen the flow of the paper.

⇒ Paragraph 7 appears to be extraneous unless the Reagan administration's policies on deinstitutionalization can be connected to the thesis claim. If so, then Paragraph 7 can be included in the history of deinstitutionalization in Paragraph 5.

⇒ Similarly, the history of the depression in Paragraph 6 is too broad a topic and should be clarified to focus on the hobo during the depression.

- **When you look at the paper as a whole, does the organization of the paper reflect what you promised in your intro/thesis? Does the logic of the argument flow well from paragraph to paragraph? Is there important information that should occur earlier in the paper?**

⇒ The claim of the paper is that deinstitutionalization has led to transforming the "hobo" to the "homeless person." The claim emphasizes deinstitutionalization, but the paper begins with a description of the "hobo." Either the paper should begin with a discussion of deinstitutionalization or the claim should be reworked.

⇒ With regard to the flow of the paper, history should come before effects. The history of deinstitutionalization in Paragraph 5 should be placed before the effects of deinstitutionalization in Paragraph 4. Similarly, the history of the depression in Paragraph 6 should be moved up.

A reverse outline is a helpful editing tool that highlights problem areas in organization, thesis support, and flow of the paper. A reverse outline serves as an effective starting point for the revision process. That being said, it is important that your reverse outline be done as early as possible in the revision process, right after the first draft is written, so you won't have to rework the organization of the entire paper later down the line.

Last modified 8/11/11