



Reverse Outline: A Tool for Revision

What is it?

A reverse outline is a revision tool that helps you understand what you have said, so that you can then clarify or reorganize your draft, or even discover a new idea that ties everything together. It is an outline not of what you plan to write, but of what you have already written. When you make a reverse outline, you are not judging or editing your writing, but simply *describing* what is on the page. You are stepping back and viewing your work from the perspective of a reader, almost being your own “other set of eyes.”

How do I do it?

Ideally, first print out what you’ve written. Getting away from the screen will help you gain perspective and remember that right now you are a reader, not a re-writer. After you read each paragraph, number it, and, on another sheet of paper, make a two-columned outline that indicates the *point* and the *purpose* of each paragraph. In other words, *what* are you saying, and *why* are you saying it?

It will look something like this:

	Point(s)/What?	Purpose/Why?
1	Broyard shows, through his own cancer journey, that metaphors can be empowering.	To establish what is appealing and compelling about B’s argument.
2	Martin links scientific metaphors about female biological processes to the disempowerment of women.	To introduce an argument that challenges Broyard’s.
3	Broyard’s argument is flawed; metaphors individuals develop can have negative social consequences.	Put Broyard and Martin in dialogue with one another; further critique of B.
4	We should develop new, neutral or positive metaphors for terminal illnesses and for female biological processes.	Draw conclusions, suggest future direction for metaphorization.

Notes:

- Sometimes people skip the introductory paragraph.
- You may be making a few different points in a paragraph; you should note them all.
- Although this is intended to be a descriptive outline, people often end up writing what they meant to say or what they now see they should say. This can be equally as useful, as long as you recognize the difference between what is on the page and what should be there.
- Sometimes it is difficult to articulate the purpose of each paragraph, so don’t worry if you can’t fully fill out both columns. By just thinking about the purpose of a paragraph, you might start to see what each paragraph is *doing*, how it is contributing to the larger purpose of your paper. And you might spot a paragraph or two that simply isn’t necessary.
- When you are outlining your points, do so in complete sentences. That way, when you are done, you will have on a single page the argument or logic of your entire paper.

What's next?

After reverse outlining, you can use the questions below to rethink your paper and make plans for revision. When you have a lot of (re)thinking to do, you might use timed, free writing to make connections and generate new ideas.

- Have I answered the prompt? If this paper is for a class, you might want first to consider whether you have addressed the prompt clearly and met the expectations of the assignment, both in spirit and in letter. You might ask yourself: What is the purpose of this assignment?
- What is the relationship between the parts and the whole? Compare your individual points to your thesis and conclusion. Do the body paragraphs suggest something different from what you initially intended? Do you see a new, more specific, accurate, or compelling central idea emerging? Or did you lose focus and stray in a non-productive way from your purpose? You may want to revise your main idea to accommodate the individual points you have made. Or you may want to revise the body or parts of it so that it better supports your main idea.
- What is the relationship among the parts? Is my argument coherent? Do the ideas build on one another? How does my *thinking* develop? Rethinking, reorganization, or improving your *signposts* may be in order here.
- Have I made clear each individual point and its relationship to the previous point? You might think of the first sentence of a paragraph as a *signpost*, providing your readers with a clear sense of direction, as you guide them through your paper. Your signposts should make explicit the point your paragraph will develop, in addition to providing a sense of coherence between points and making clear, again, the relationship between the parts and the whole. Particularly in a longer paper, you may need more than one sentence to guide the reader from one section to the next.
- Is each paragraph unified, purposeful, and working to support the main idea of your paper? Is there a paragraph that makes more than one point? Are there points that needed to be developed individually, by paragraph, so that each idea gets the attention it deserves? Do not be afraid to cut an irrelevant, redundant, or convoluted paragraph. Or to combine and condense a couple of paragraphs.
- If you're not sure about the purpose of a paragraph, but you sense that it *is* important, try figuring this out by freewriting to yourself (writing quickly, without editing your words or ideas), starting with lines such as:
 - I included this paragraph because...
 - The paper as a whole needs this paragraph because...Hopefully, this will help you discover and then make clear the paragraph's purpose OR convince yourself that it's okay to get rid of it.

What else?

Now that you know what a reverse outline is and how to use it, you might find it's a great way to get feedback from others. Rather than asking a friend or family member to judge your work or tell you how to fix it, ask them to describe it to you, to tell you what they think you are trying to say. And then, of course, you can always return the favor!

This handout was developed by Kristen Brookes and was last updated March 2019.