REVERSE OUTLINING

Reverse outlining is exactly what it sounds like: a process whereby you take away the supporting writing and are left with a paper's main points or main ideas, sometimes represented by the paper's topic sentences. Your reverse outline provides a bullet-point view of the paper's structure because you are looking at the main points of the paper, whether written by yourself or by someone else.

Reverse Outlining for Comprehension

Some assignments ask you to read and analyze complex information. In such cases, reverse outlining a text or lecture can help you distill the main ideas into short, clear statements. Look for key terms and concepts that can help define these main ideas – but also make sure that you understand what they each mean in their context, since simply copying down key terms won't automatically guarantee that you understand them!

Reverse Outlining for Writing and Revision

You can also use reverse outlining to revise your own work and to ensure that your writing is clear, well-structured, and logically coherent. All writers need ways to test their drafts for the logical sequence of points – its structure – and a reverse outline allows you to read a condensed version of what you have written. This can be particularly valuable if you wrote without an outline (never recommended for academic writing!), or if you modified the structure of your draft as you wrote.

As shown in more detail on the next page, reverse outline of your own writing can help you (1) determine if your paper meets its goal, (2) discover places to expand on your evidence or analysis, and (3) see where readers might be tripped up by your organization or structure.

How to Create and Use a Reverse Outline

1. **Start a new document or use a blank piece of paper.** It's important to keep the original writing separate from the reverse outline you're about to create.
2. **List the main idea of each paragraph**, working systematically through the entire paper**.** If a paragraph's topic sentence provides a succinct version of the paragraph's argument, you can simply copy that sentence into the outline as a summary for that paragraph. Otherwise, write a one-sentence summary to express as concisely as possible the main point of the paragraph.
3. **Number your outline** for ease of reference.
4. **Edit your writing,** expanding or condensing passages to achieve greater concision and clarity. On the next page are specific questions that will help as you begin editing.

Asking Questions about Your Writing with a Reverse Outline

- *Does every paragraph relate back to your main idea?*

  Many writers find that new ideas or topics appear near the end of a reverse outline. These topic shifts may signal that you need to revise certain paragraphs in you draft to be sure they relate back to your main idea, or they may inspire you to revise your main idea so that it takes on some of the new points these paragraphs suggest.

  By viewing the structure of your paper from the vantage of a reverse outline, you can make productive decisions about whether to keep certain paragraphs or cut them from a draft.

- *Where might a reader have trouble following the order of your ideas?*

  You can use a reverse outline to review a paper's organization or structure and then make strategic choices for rearranging the paper on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis, or for adding or removing paragraphs to improve organization.

- *Do several of your paragraphs repeat one idea?*

  If your reverse outline shows two paragraphs that make similar points, consider combining them or revising one so that it does not make too similar a point.

- *Does one paragraph juggle several topics?*

  If one item on your reverse outline discusses more topics than other paragraphs, that may be a paragraph your reader will struggle to follow. By dividing its topics into two or more paragraphs, each one discussing a more focused topic or set of topics, you may be able to ensure that your reader follows your meaning.

- *Are your paragraphs too long? Too short?*

  By comparing total paragraphs to total pages, you can learn your average paragraph length and more easily spot paragraphs that are unusually long or short.

The Brandeis University Writing Program, including the Writing Center, First-Year Writing, and Writing in the Majors, offers support for writing throughout the community, including undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and staff.

For more information, see www.brandeis.edu/UWP or write to UWP@brandeis.edu.