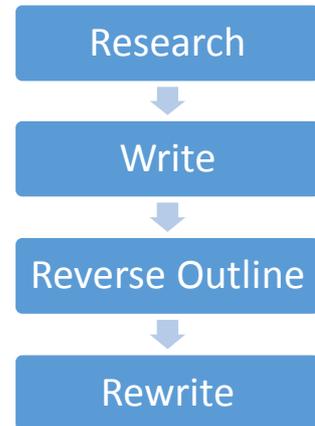


Adapted with kind permission from *Explorations in Style* by Rachel Cayley at <http://explorationsofstyle.com/2011/02/09/reverse-outlines/> and Dr Inger Mewburn at <https://sites.google.com/site/twblacklinemasters/reverse-outlines>

Reverse Outlines

Generally we are taught to create a plan or an outline before we begin any piece of writing. While this is a crucial step, it also assumes that you know in advance everything you will include in your draft. This is unlikely, and in reality, many of your thoughts and ideas will develop as you are writing. They are the product of the dialogue between you and the screen or paper. This is why **reverse outlines** are useful.



What is a reverse outline?

A reverse outline is a plan you can identify from an existing draft of your work. It does not replace an initial plan, but is a useful tool in the **redrafting** process.

In order to complete a reverse outline, you need a **first draft** of your writing to work with.

The reverse outline can:

- ✓ Help you diagnose structural issues with your writing;
- ✓ Highlight the strengths and weaknesses of your argument;
- ✓ Demonstrate whether or not you have answered the question you were asked.

A reverse outline will be useful if:

- ✓ You know the material well, but struggle with how to put it across;
- ✓ You are unsure if you have focused on the question or topic you were set;
- ✓ You think your main ideas aren't coming across;
- ✓ Your paper seems scattered or incoherent.

A reverse outline is a great way to begin the revision process without completely redrafting or rewriting potentially good work.

Reverse Outline: How-to

There are a number of steps to be taken when creating a reverse outline:

1. Create an outline of your essay or assignment

- First, number each paragraph in your original draft.
- Copy and paste the sentence containing the **key idea** from each paragraph into a new document. Keep the paragraph numbering in this document too.
- Turn these sentences into bold type.

2. Read your outline and establish the structure or argument

- Now read through the new document. This should be a summary of each of your paragraphs, numbered in chronological order.
- Is there a coherent story/argument emerging?
- If you can't find the key idea, or the paragraph contains more than one idea, you have some options.

3. If you can't find the key idea in the paragraph:

- Write a brief description of what the paragraph in your essay is about (or should be about) and include this in your reverse outline list.
- Alternatively, reconsider why you included the paragraph in the first place. You might need to cut it if the information or argument is irrelevant or cannot be expanded.

4. If you have too many ideas in one paragraph:

- Try splitting the paragraph into two or more paragraphs where you see you have moved on to a new idea.
- Number these paragraphs.
- Now look for the key idea from each of these paragraphs and add these to your reverse outline, again in chronological order.

5. Look again at the new document

- Is there a coherent story/argument emerging?
- If you feel the overall story/argument does not flow properly or jumps around too much, rearrange the sentences in your new document.
- Keep the original numbering (this will help you when you get back to your original draft).

If you have followed the steps listed above, you will have a document that contains your essay paragraphs in the order that creates the strongest, most cohesive argument.

Now, you should revisit the essay itself, rewriting, rearranging or deleting paragraphs as needed. The structure and argument of the essay should reflect that of the reverse outline you have just completed.

If you are still uncertain, consider the example below.

Reverse outline – an example

The following reverse outline was created from the essay title:

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

Look carefully at the outline. Does each paragraph support the claim, or do some contain irrelevant information? Do the paragraphs seem to lead into each other, or are the ideas scattered throughout the paper?

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

Remember

Reverse outlining can take some time, depending on the length of your essay or assignment. However, it is a worthwhile troubleshooting tool for the often overlooked redrafting process.

Reverse outline: Troubleshooting

Potential issues with the above assignment:

- The summary of Paragraph 6 is significantly longer than the others. This paragraph contains too many ideas. This paragraph should be broken up into two or even three separate paragraphs.
- The assignment is disorganised. It begins with a discussion of “hobos,” but doesn’t return to it for at least four paragraphs. The order needs to be rearranged.
- Paragraphs 3 and 4 seem to be in the wrong place: since histories usually cause effects, one expects the order of these paragraphs to be reversed.
- Paragraph 8 doesn’t seem to belong where it is now, but rather up with Paragraphs 2 and 3.
- The paragraphs don’t seem to support the main claim. In this example, the focus seems to be more on deinstitutionalization than on either hobos or the homeless. The writer might want to change either the emphasis of the paragraphs or the essay title.

Have a go at making these changes; does this improve the structure and flow of the essay?

Reverse outline: Recap

To recap, by reviewing your reverse outline, you should be able to:

- ✓ Diagnose structural issues with your writing;
- ✓ Highlight the strengths and weaknesses of your argument;
- ✓ Demonstrate whether or not you have answered the question you were asked.



Now that you have seen a reverse outline completed, try creating your own with a first draft of your work. You are aiming to create a better structured, more coherent piece of writing, cutting irrelevant information and identifying the gaps you need to fill.

For further resources on the drafting process or help with essay structure, take a look at the “Paragraphing”, “Powerful Paragraphs” and “Signposting” resources in the Essay Writing Skills section of the Learning Development Service website.