



Reverse Outlining: What does it say? What does it do?

What is a reverse outline? Unlike a regular outline, which you write *before* you draft a paper, a reverse outline is something you do *after* you write a draft.

Why should I reverse outline? The reverse outline forces you to see the big picture of your paper and helps you look at your paper more objectively – through the readers’ eyes. Reverse outlining is especially useful for:

1. Reordering paragraphs
2. Spotting paragraphs that have too many ideas in them and therefore don’t hold together
3. Finding paragraphs that don’t relate well to your thesis

How do I make a reverse outline? Go through the paper and number each paragraph, starting with the first BODY paragraph. Do the following:

- On a separate sheet of paper, write Body Paragraph #1 and answer the following questions:
 - What does this paragraph **say**? (main idea of paragraph)
 - What does this paragraph **do**? (i.e., does it summarize, criticize, or give a reason for something?)
 - How does this paragraph help support or build on your thesis?
- Then, write Body Paragraph #2 and answer the 3 questions above for that paragraph. . . and so on until you have reverse outlined all body paragraphs in your paper.
- After going through the entire paper, you will have an outline with an overview of the content and rhetorical function of each paragraph in your paper.

Then what? After you finish reverse outlining, look carefully at your overview and ask yourself:

- Are the paragraphs properly focused, or are there multiple main ideas in a single paragraph?
- Does the topic sentence reflect the main point of the paragraph? If not, write a new topic sentence.
- Are some of those ideas in the paragraph extraneous, and should they be deleted? Or do they simply need to be moved to a different part of the paper?
- When you look at the outline as a whole, does the organization of the paper reflect your introduction / thesis? If the answer is no, consider whether you need to revise the thesis or reorganize the paper.