



## 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.