

The Reverse Outline

What is a reverse outline? If a regular outline is something you write before you draft out your paper, a reverse outline is something you do after you write a draft. Reverse outlining can help distill the main ideas from a text into short, clear statements. We can also use reverse outlining to revise our own work: it helps us look an essay's focus, logic, and organization. Reverse outlining follows a two-step, repeatable process:

How do I make a reverse outline?

1. Number each paragraph.
2. On a separate piece of paper, write down the topic and your claim about this topic.
3. Skip a line and then write #1 and the main point (or points) of your first paragraph. Skip a line, then on the next line write #2 and the main point(s) of the second paragraph. Go through the entire paper this way. Note: **If you can't complete each step in 5-10 words, the paragraph may need to be altered.**
4. When you have gone through the entire paper, you will have an outline giving you an overview of your entire paper.
5. Now look carefully at your overview, asking yourself the following questions:

Yes	No	Are the paragraphs properly focused, or are there multiple main ideas competing for control of a single paragraph?
Yes	No	Now that you've identified the main point of each paragraph, does the topic sentence reflect that point? (If they don't, revise)
Yes	No	Are some of those ideas in a paragraph extraneous and should they therefore be deleted from the paper? Or do they simply need to be moved to a different part of the paper? (Many times you may find that a random idea tacked onto the end of, say, paragraph five really belongs in paragraph eleven where you fully develop that idea.)
Yes	No	When you look at the outline as a whole, does the organization of the paper reflect what you promised in your introduction / thesis? (If the answer is no, consider whether you need to revise the thesis or revise the organization of the paper.)

Additional signs of trouble: If you can't complete each ¶ summary in 5-10 words, the paragraph may need to be altered. You should be able to summarize the topic and the manner of support quickly; if you can't, revise the paragraph until you can.

Alternative Write up:

1. In the **left-hand margin**, write down the topic of each paragraph. Try to use as few words as possible.
 - When used for a reading, these notes should work as **quick references** for future study or in-class discussion.
 - When revising your own work, these notes should tell you if each paragraph is **focused and clear**.

2. In the right-hand margin, write down how the paragraph topic advances the overall argument of the text. Again, be brief.
 - When reading, these notes allow you to **follow the logic of the essay**, making it easier for you to analyze or discuss later.
 - When revising your own work, these **notes should tell you if each paragraph fits in the overall organization** of your paper. You may also notice that paragraphs should be shifted after completing this step.