

Reverse Outlining

One way to check the logic of your paper is to create a reverse outline. A reverse outline is a simple outline created after you complete a draft of your paper. The reverse outline can help you identify (1) paragraphs that have more than one main idea, (2) paragraphs that fail to contribute (or only marginally contribute) to supporting your thesis, and (3) structural problems at the level of the paragraph.

Creating a Reverse Outline

1. List your paper's thesis at the top of a piece of paper (or highlight your paper's thesis in the draft itself).
2. As you read your paper, list the main idea of each paragraph (in order) under your thesis (or next to each paragraph in your draft). You may benefit from numbering each paragraph and each main idea (so that the numbers you give to each paragraph correspond to the numbers you give to each main idea). If it seems appropriate for your paper, you might consider listing what each paragraph *does* for your argument instead of (or in addition to) listing the main idea of each paragraph.

Using a Reverse Outline to Identify Weak Elements in a Paper

1. Carefully examine the order of the main ideas of each paragraph. Does your paper proceed in a logical manner? Are there main ideas that should be grouped together or kept apart? Does the order of your paragraphs match your methodology? Such questions can help you improve the structure of your paper.
2. Identify how each paragraph supports your thesis or is otherwise necessary for your argument. If you cannot identify how a paragraph supports your thesis or is necessary for your argument, consider omitting or reworking the paragraph.
3. If you have difficulty identifying the main idea in a paragraph in a concise manner, consider revising the paragraph or dividing it into two or more paragraphs. If you have difficulty identifying any substantial idea at all in a paragraph, consider omitting the paragraph or joining it to another paragraph.

The reverse outline is a useful tool for evaluating and revising your work. It can improve the coherency of your paper and the clarity of your ideas as you move toward your final draft.