



Reverse Outlining

What is reverse outlining?

Reverse outlining is a great step to take once you've completed a first draft and are ready to begin revising your work. The process of reverse outlining is simply making an outline **AFTER** an essay has been written. Here's how it works:

Begin by writing a single sentence statement of your thesis or argument at the top of the first page. Then, for every paragraph, write the main idea or main argument in a few words in the margin next to that paragraph. This process allows you to see the structure or progress of an essay in a quick and clear way.

While you are creating your reverse outline, keep these questions in mind:

- **Am I able to extract one main idea or one main argument from each paragraph?**

If you are finding more than one main idea, you will need to break the paragraph up into two or more paragraphs, each with its own main idea. If there is no main idea, the paragraph may need more clarity in expressing the main idea. Or it may be unnecessary fluff.

- **Do my ideas make a logical progression from one paragraph to the next?** For example, maybe your first body paragraph talks about *how to address the problem of homelessness*, then the second paragraph gives *a background of homelessness in your area*, while the third talks about *the demographics of homeless people in the US*. You will need to decide what order of the paragraphs makes the most logical sense and then create connections among them so that they lead the reader smoothly through your argument.

- **Does every paragraph summary relate back to the thesis?** If you have ideas that don't relate directly to the thesis, then you either need to expand your thesis or cut out the paragraph. Or perhaps your paragraph needs another sentence or two to be effectively and explicitly connected to your thesis.

- **If you are writing for a class assignment:** Once all of your main points are clearly laid out and logically organized, you can see more fully if you answered every part of the prompt. For example, maybe the prompt asks you to address a counterargument, but after you made your reverse outline, you realize that it isn't to be found in your paper. You will need to add it!