Reverse Outline Activity Sheet

Many writers use a reverse outline to check their work. Reverse outlining is a process whereby you take away all of the supporting writing and are left with a paper’s main points or main ideas, sometimes represented by your paper’s topic sentences. Your reverse outline provides a bullet-point view of your paper’s structure, because you are looking at the main points of the paper you wrote.

Experienced writers, especially when writing longer papers about a complex subject, need ways to test their drafts for the logical sequence of points—it’s structure. A reverse outline allows writers to read a condensed version of what they wrote, and provides one good way to examine and produce a successful paper.

A reverse outline can help you:

- Determine if your paper meets its goal
- Discover places to expand on your evidence or analysis
- See where readers might be tripped up by your organization or structure

Reverse outline step by step activity:

1. Start with a complete draft to have a fuller picture of the plan you carried out. You can use a partial draft to review the organization of the paragraphs you have written so far.

2. Construct the outline by listing the main idea of each paragraph in your draft in a blank document. If a paragraph’s topic sentence provides a succinct version of the paragraph’s argument, you can paste that sentence into the outline as a summary for that paragraph. Otherwise, write a one-sentence summary to express the main point of the paragraph.

3. Number your list for ease of reference. Use your reverse outline to answer questions.
Once you’ve done this go back through it, ask yourself these questions, and make corrections accordingly:

**Does every paragraph relate back to your main idea?**
Your reverse outline will help you think more effectively about your paper’s focus: its big picture. Does every item on your list relate back to your main point?
Many writers find that new ideas or topics appear near the end of a reverse outline. These topic shifts may signal that you need to revise certain paragraphs in your draft to be sure they relate back to your main idea, or they may inspire you to revise your main idea so it takes on some of the new points these paragraphs suggest.
By viewing the structure of your paper from the vantage of a reverse outline, you can make productive decisions about whether to keep certain paragraphs or cut them from a draft.

**Where might a reader have trouble following the order of your ideas?**
You can use a reverse outline to review a paper’s organization or structure and then make strategic choices for rearranging the paper on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis, or for adding or removing paragraphs to improve organization.

**Do several of your paragraphs repeat one idea?**
If your reverse outline shows two paragraphs that make similar points, consider combining them or revising one so that it does not make too similar a point.

**Does one paragraph juggle several topics?**
If one item on your reverse outline discusses more topics than other paragraphs, that may be a paragraph your reader will struggle to follow. By dividing its topics into two or more paragraphs, each one discussing a more focused topic or set of topics, you may be able to ensure that your reader follows your meaning.

**Are your paragraphs too long? Too short?**
By comparing total paragraphs to total pages, you can learn your average paragraph length and more easily spot paragraphs that are unusually long or short.

From the Writing Center
at the Academic Resource Center

John Tyler Community College
Source Referenced