Reverse Outlines

If a regular outline is something you do *before* drafting your paper, then a reverse outline is something you do *after* writing a draft. Both experienced and beginner writers need ways to check their drafts for a logical sequence of points: its structure.

A reverse outline can help you:

1. Develop your argument
2. Improve your organization or structure
3. Determine if your paper meets the assignment criteria
4. Refine your paper on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis

Outlines provide a visual representation of a paper’s structural design. Organizing your paper well is crucial to the overall clarity of your argument.

# How to create a reverse outline

1. **Start with a complete draft** to have a fuller picture of the plan you carried out. While a complete draft is most effective, you can also 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 (or here, below). If a paragraph's topic sentence provides a concise 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.

# Practice creating your reverse outline

Thesis Statement: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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Main point, paragraph 1: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Main point, paragraph 2: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Main point, paragraph 3: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Main point, paragraph 4: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Main point, paragraph 5: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Main point, paragraph 6: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Conclusion (restated thesis): \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

# Use your reverse outline to answer questions

***Does every paragraph relate back to your main idea?***

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 that it includes the new points these paragraphs suggest. Your reverse outline will help you think more effectively about your paper's focus.

***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 the same idea?***

If your reverse outline shows that two paragraphs make similar points, consider combining them or otherwise revising.

***Are your paragraphs too long? Too short? Or, are there too many ideas in a single paragraph?***

Compare total paragraphs to total pages to learn your average paragraph length and more easily spot paragraphs that are unusually long or short. Make sure each paragraph presents one central idea.

# Use your reverse outline to revise your paper

1. **Compare your main ideas to your thesis.** Determine whether your thesis (paper’s claim) changed as you wrote. If so, you should revise your thesis to accommodate what you have written. OR have you have strayed in a non-productive direction away from your thesis? If so, you should revise the body of your paper. This step may involve a back-and-forth between thesis revision and body revision. In the end, every main idea in your body paragraphs must be relevant to and support your thesis statement.
2. **Consider reorganizing.** Ask yourself if your ideas flow logically from one to another. Is there a better order in which to present your ideas to the reader?
3. **Check for clarity.** You may understand the point of a paragraph and why it belongs where it is, but do you make this clear to your reader? Are you giving clear signals about where your paper is going? Does your voice work as a thread, running through your paper, guiding and making connections for the reader? This step will likely involve writing or rewriting transition sentences between paragraphs.
4. **Check for purpose.** Paragraphs without a purpose are those whose main idea you have trouble identifying. If you are not certain about the point of one of your paragraphs, but you sense that it is important, brainstorm ideas about its purpose and work towards clarity.