

# Reverse Outlines

A reverse outline is a way to make sense of the structure of your essay draft by summarizing paragraphs into phrases.

Sometimes we make an outline and then by the time we finish our first draft, we haven't stayed with our intended structure. Even in later drafts of our work, we can sort of lose the thread of our thoughts. We are too close to the text, in this case, missing the forest for the trees. One way to get an understanding of how the ideas are progressing and where to make structural changes is to do a reverse outline. It will help to see the development of ideas from a more distant view.

## How to do it

- Either in print or on the screen, read through each paragraph.
- In the margin, summarize the main point in a single word or phrase. If you're using Word or Google Docs, use the Comment feature to do this.
- Let's say you are writing a paper on Shakespeare. Your first paragraph might be summarized as *introduction*, the next might be *author background*, then *text background*, then *Ophelia overview*, etc.
- This process essentially reverse engineers an outline from where you are at that point in the writing.

## Troubleshooting

If you are unable to summarize the paragraph in a clear statement, then it could be one of two reasons:

1. **You don't have a central point to your paragraph.** If so, try to include a topic sentence at the top of the paragraph that explicitly links the evidence to the previous point or the main thesis.
2. **You have more than one central point to the paragraph.** If this is the case, think about breaking up the ideas into their own paragraphs in order to clarify your points.

## How to use it

Once you have the paragraphs summarized into central points, you can use it in several ways:

1. Compare your reverse outline to the original outline and see how your work is progressing.
2. See where you've repeated information. If you've said the same thing in several places, you can decide whether to gather all of it in one spot or eliminate some of it.
3. See if you're missing something. Sometimes, we jump from one idea to another and skip a few logical steps that our readers need in order to understand what we're saying. If your points seem to skip around, you can reorganize so that it flows better.
4. See if you've changed directions and need to re-think your main point. We often figure out what we want to say when we're about one-third of the way in. If your points seem to go off in a different direction, you might decide you need to reorganize or even re-think your main idea.

Hopefully, you will be able to see the way the essay's arguments and evidence are progressing towards explaining and defending the main point.