Reverse Outlines
Contributor: Aaron Smale

During the revision process, it is often necessary to check for understanding within your paper to ensure that your ideas are strongly developed and well-organized. However, it can sometimes be hard to read through your draft and reorganize blocks of text and efficiently manage your revisions. When revising, it is helpful to locate your ideas within paragraphs and distill the main topics that link your claims, reasons, and analysis together. One helpful strategy to revise your draft at this stage of the writing process is the Reverse Outline: An outline that is constructed after you have a working draft of your paper. In a reverse outline, you summarize each main point of your paper in manageable sentences. Once you have these convenient summaries, you can identify points in your paper that deal with too many ideas at once or points that don’t explore ideas enough.

A Reverse Outline Is Helpful. . .

- During the revision process when you have a working draft
- Checking for understanding
- Clarifying main points/topics and strengthening focus
- Identifying where too many ideas exist in a paragraph or when one idea is not explored enough.
- Strengthening concision where one idea may be overdeveloped and can be trimmed down within the context of a paragraph.
- Organizing your ideas in a more logical and effective pattern, since the order in which most writers draft is not the most effective order once written.
- Identifying key opportunities to build connections and transitions between your main points

When NOT to Use a Reverse Outline

- In order to address later-order concerns such as grammar, punctuation, usage, and sentence level concerns.
- When working with a near-complete draft or when constructing an initial draft.

Even though constructing a Reverse Outline may seem daunting at first, there are several key ways to approach this strategy to help ease the process so your paper can be managed efficiently and effectively.
How to Use a Reverse Outline

1. Using your draft, try to summarize the main topic of each paragraph on a separate sheet of paper in about 12-15 words.
   - If you find yourself struggling to think of even five words, your main idea is probably not developed enough.
   - If you are struggling to summarize a paragraph’s main point in less than 25-30 words, you probably have too many ideas competing for the reader’s attention.

2. Once you have summarized your points on another sheet of paper, you now have convenient summaries that can be easily moved around. In addition to being a dependable indicator of what your topic sentences are, these summaries can quickly show opportunities for revising your organization.

3. Now that you have all of your main points laid out in your reverse outline, you now have a map of where your paper may need more logical progression or supporting details.

4. At this point, you can now feel free to develop your main ideas and move them around as necessary to strengthen your argument and fulfill the requirements of the assignment.

5. An effective alternative method for using a reverse outline by yourself is to share your document with another person and have them construct a reverse outline as well. When both people have a reverse outline, you can compare the main points to see if they match up.
   - If the outlines are fairly different, this can highlight points where important information is missing or the material lacks focus.
   - Lastly, having another person construct a reverse outline of your paper helps to gauge how well you are conveying your points to your audience.