

The Reverse Outline

A reverse outline is a map of a paper or article made by summarizing each paragraph into a single sentence. When you are writing, you are necessarily zooming in to work with details—sentences, words, and punctuation. It is easy to lose sight of the argument as a whole. A reverse outline enables you to zoom out and ensure that the big picture, too, is logical, well organized, well argued, and helping you achieve your goal. How to create a reverse outline:

This process tells you if your paragraphs are unified, developed, organized, and necessary.

1. Number each paragraph in your draft.
2. On a separate sheet, write the numbers in a column on the left side of the paper. Write your thesis or major claim at the top of the page.
3. For each paragraph in your draft, ask yourself these three questions:
 - **WHAT** the purpose/point/goal of this paragraph is, with one verb (for example, “this paragraph **describes** background information”)
 - **HOW** you are trying to achieve this purpose/point/goal (for example, “**by providing details** on how this experiment was done in the late 19th century”)
 - **WHY** you need this information (for example, “**in order to help my readers understand** the historical changes with this experiment.”)
4. Write the answers beside the number on your separate sheet.
5. You should be able to answer all three questions for each paragraph.
6. When you are done, you will have an outline of your paper!

You can also simply write your responses in the margins of your paper.

- If you have trouble summarizing a paragraph in one sentence or less, you probably have too many ideas in the paragraph. Break it up into two or three paragraphs, or get rid of the extraneous material.
- Verify that each paragraph supports or relates clearly to your thesis or main claim.
- If your summary is the same length as the paragraph, the paragraph is probably underdeveloped. Either develop the ideas further or consider whether it is part of an earlier or later paragraph.
- Look for repetition or paragraphs that seem very similar. Maybe they should be combined?
- If the summaries don't seem logically organized or feel choppy or jumpy, you might want to reorganize your paragraphs better.
- If some summaries seem unrelated to the rest, you might want to remove these paragraphs from your paper altogether.
- Check if there are gaps in the argument. Are there key words in the claim that don't appear in the outline? Maybe you need to add more ideas—or revise your claim.
- These summaries can be used to create topic sentences and can also help you write stronger introductions, thesis statements, and conclusions.

Reverse outlines are useful when you are stuck in the details, when you have lost the thread of your argument, or when your paper is so long that you have a hard time keeping track of everything.

Some additional tips:

- If your paper has subheadings, include them in your reverse outline.
- You can do a partial reverse outline for one or two sections of your paper or argument— you don't always need to outline the whole paper.
- You can make a reverse outline on your word processor using headings and then the outline function, but working on paper makes it more likely that you will summarize the whole paragraph, not just a part of it.
- Read your outline out loud as you might notice some additional problems with your organization.
- If you need to write an abstract, your reverse outline is an excellent place to start.