

## On Using Reverse Outlines

Many writers use outlines before they start to write to help them stay on track through the initial writing process. But outlining after something that has already been written—whether your own or someone else’s paper—can be invaluable since these “reverse outlines” reveal the underlying structure (or structural problems) of a piece of writing.

### HOW DOES A REVERSE OUTLINE WORK?

Creating and using a reverse outline is simple. This description comes from Rachael Cayley’s excellent academic writing blog: Explorations of Style (<http://explorationsofstyle.com/>).

1. Number your paragraphs. Paragraphs are the essential means of “chunking” information in a long piece of writing.
2. Identify the topic of each paragraph. Next summarize in one point or sentence the main point of each subsequent paragraph; try to limit yourself to one sentence per paragraph, but do include all main points. At this point, you can also make note of the following:
  - a. Is there a recognizable topic sentence?
  - b. How long is the paragraph?
    - i. Does the topic seem sufficiently developed?
    - ii. Is there more than one topic in the paragraph?

In essence, what you are trying to create is a point-form list that identifies all of the key arguments and statements that the author is making.

3. Arrange these topics in an outline.
4. Analyze this outline, assessing the logic (where elements have been placed in relation to one another) and the proportion (how much space is being devoted to each element).
5. Use this analysis to create a revised outline.
6. Use this revised outline to reorganize your text.
7. Go back to your answers in **2a** and **2b** to help you create topic sentences and cohesion in your paragraphs.

### WHY USE REVERSE OUTLINES?

Reverse outlines help in several ways:

First, they transform a long and often complex piece of writing into something that can fit neatly onto a page or two, which makes it easier to visualize as a whole text. Second, they help create a little distance between you and

your own writing, which is essential when editing your own text. And finally, they give another way to think about a piece of writing, a more “macro” view of the task rather than the sentence-level “micro” view that usually preoccupies writers.

## TIPS FOR USING REVERSE OUTLINES

If you are having trouble summing up the topic of a paragraph in a single sentence or phrase, it might indicate a problem in the paragraph. The paragraph might be too long and contain too many points; or it might contain points that don't relate to one another in a clear way. In this case, write one or several subpoints under the paragraphs main points, and then use this information to revise your paragraphs if you are working on your own writing.

Once you have written a clear summary of each paragraph, you might consider using that summary as the topic sentence for your paragraph if you are editing your own paper.

Reverse outlining might have to happen more than once, especially if you've made a lot of changes to the organization of your paper. Once you have completed a new draft, you can use a reverse outline to check it in the same way.

## SAMPLE REVERSE OUTLINE FOR A SHORT PAPER

This example comes from Duke University's very helpful handout on reverse outlines (<https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/reverse-outline.original.pdf>).

1. Introduction and thesis statement: Deinstitutionalizing mental patients in the late twentieth century led to transforming the “hobo” into the “homeless person.”
2. The image of the hobo before World War II
3. The image of the homeless person today
4. The effects of deinstitutionalization
5. A history of deinstitutionalization
6. A history of the depression; how the depression is both different and similar to the time period of deinstitutionalization; incorrect beliefs about the causes and timeframe of deinstitutionalization.
7. The Reagan administration's policies on deinstitutionalization
8. The realities of life as a “homeless person” contrasted to the romantic notions of “riding the rails.”
9. Conclusion