REVERSE OUTLINING

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What is a reverse outline?

Reverse outlining is the Swiss army knife of revising. Through this process, you can identify problems with your claims, the structure of your paper, and the organization of your paragraphs.

We usually think of outlines as something we write *before* we write a paper—that is, if we write one at all. However, a reverse outline gets its name by being written *after* the paper it outlines. Whereas a regular outline is a tool to help organize your thoughts before you begin to compose, a reverse outline is a way of revealing how you organized your thoughts while you wrote. If you are concerned that your paper might not be saying what you think it is saying, that your main ideas aren't really coming across, or that your paper might seem scattered or incoherent, a reverse outline is a great way to begin the revision process.

How do I make a reverse outline?

As you read through your essay, write the main thought or thoughts of each paragraph in order on a separate sheet or, alternatively, in the left margin next to the paragraph. In essence, you are trying to turn your essay into a list of bullet points, listing the point each paragraph is trying to deal with without getting into your argument or reasoning. Your final product should look something like this:

> **Claim**: Deinstitutionalizing mental patients in the late twentieth-century led to transforming the "hobo" to the "homeless person."
>
> **Paragraph 1**: Introduction
> **Paragraph 2**: The image of the hobo before World War II
> **Paragraph 3**: The image of the homeless person today
> **Paragraph 4**: The effects of deinstitutionalization
> **Paragraph 5**: A history of deinstitutionalization
> **Paragraph 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
> **Paragraph 7**: The Reagan administration's policies on deinstitutionalization
> **Paragraph 8**: The realities of life as a "homeless person" contrasted to the romantic notions of "riding the rails."
> **Paragraph 9**: Conclusion

If you find yourself having problems summing up the main ideas of a paragraph in one or two sentences, you probably have too many ideas in that paragraph; try splitting it into two or more paragraphs. Alternately, sometimes summarizing a paragraph can be difficult because it contains too few ideas; if your paragraph has no unifying point, your summary of it won't be able to articulate that point. In that case, reconsider why you included the paragraph in the first place.

Now that I have a reverse outline, what do I do with it?

Look carefully at your outline, considering both your organization and your main claim. Does each paragraph support your claim, or do you have one or two that contain extraneous information? Do your paragraphs seem to lead into each other, or are your ideas scattered throughout the paper?

Looking at the example above, the first thing that comes to mind is that the summary of Paragraph 6 is significantly longer than the others. A closer look suggests this paragraph has too many ideas in it: why is "a history of the depression" in the same paragraph as "incorrect beliefs about the causes and timeframe of deinstitutionalization"? This paragraph should probably be broken up into two or even three separate paragraphs.

Next, the organization of the paper seems a bit off. The paper begins with a discussion of "hobos," but doesn't return to it for at least four paragraphs, if not six. This paper would likely benefit from putting Paragraph 6 after either Paragraph 1 or Paragraph 3. Furthermore, Paragraphs 3 and 4 seem to be in the wrong place: since histories usually cause effects, one expects the order of these paragraphs to be reversed. Also, Paragraph 8 doesn't seem to belong where it is now, but rather up with Paragraphs 2 and 3.

Last but not least, consider whether these paragraphs support the main claim. Is there some dissonance between what is being claimed and what is being proven? In this example, the focus seems to be more on deinstitutionalization than on either hobos or the homeless; the writer might want to change either the emphases of the paragraphs or the main claim. In addition, Paragraph 7 has no place in the paper if the claim remains as it stands, unless the writer can relate the Reagan administration's policies to this "transformation."

By reviewing your reverse outline, you should be able to identify major problem points with your claim, your evidence, or your organization, and you'll have a place to begin your revision process.