



USING REVERSE OUTLINES

Reverse outlines can be useful editing tool to help you make sure that the piece you are writing is ordered logically, that you avoid redundancy, and that the ideas hold together throughout.

There's no one magic way to do a reverse outline. But here are three methods:

Approach 1:

1. Read your piece (out loud, if possible) looking for blocks of information about specific topic or overarching idea.
2. Next to each block of information, write description in margin of what it covers.
3. On separate sheet of paper, list descriptions from the margin in order in which they appeared.
4. Use this list to consider whether you have the best flow of information to achieve what you're trying to achieve in your piece. Look for smooth transitions. Is anything missing from what you wanted to convey? Do you try to cover too many points in any one paragraph? Is the order of ideas the most logical or effective for this piece?
5. If necessary, rearrange blocks of information so that the order works best to accomplish what you want to accomplish for your piece.

This approach corresponds to the animated presentation produced by UNC-Chapel Hill's Writing Center: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZxphibAqb4/> (Links to an external site.)

Approach 2:

1. Number each paragraph.
2. On a blank document, write corresponding numbers and write the main point or points in that paragraph. The end result should be a numbered outline of your work.
3. After completing the outline, determine if the paragraphs are focused clearly or if there are too many ideas/topics in each paragraph. Do the main points of each paragraph refer back to the overarching theme you established for your piece? Are there points that seem out of order and should be moved elsewhere? Are there tangential ideas that can be deleted?

Approach 3:

1. In the left-hand margin, write the topic of each paragraph as briefly as possible.
2. In the right-hand margin, write a brief note about how this paragraph moves your argument forward.
3. You should be able to write each note in less than 10 words. The left-hand topic notes should help you identify if your paragraphs are focused and clearly written. The right-hand notes should indicate to you if your piece flows logically. The resulting notes should also help you identify redundancies or tangential ideas that can be deleted, and if paragraphs are out of order and need to be reorganized.

Approach 4: Use track changes to do a modified version of any of the approaches above.

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