



# The Writing Center

## Reverse Outlining



A reverse outline is a “backwards” outline of your essay that you create AFTER the essay is complete. The purpose of writing a reverse outline is to help you see the “big picture,” or the overarching structure, organization, and development of your essay. It helps you determine what is working well and what could be improved through revision. It also helps you to find claims without evidence, evidence without explanation, places that need reordering, repetition, and more. This is a great tool to be used during the revision part of the writing process.

### How to complete your reverse outline

1. Write your thesis/central argument at the top of the page.

Thesis Statement (Original thesis)

2. Assemble 2 columns (one on the left and one on the right of the page). Write out what your introduction was setting up to do, then in the second column write out if you accomplished your task or what you SHOULD HAVE done. For example, did you provide necessary context for your reader? Did you introduce your primary text?

Intent (What I wanted to write...)	Reality (Did I accomplish my task?)
Hook	
Transition	
Thesis Statement [possible revision(s)]	

3. For each BODY paragraph, provide a brief descriptive summary of what the paragraph is about and/or what claim the paragraph is making in the left column. Then explain the paragraph’s INTENDED purpose/focus/function. In that same left side column.
4. In the right column, make note of whether each paragraph has a claim, evidence, and analysis/explanation. Make note of the balance or lack thereof. Is the paragraph complete? Is it focused? Organized? Explain how the paragraph ACTUALLY functioned (what made it strong or weak).

Body 1

What is the paragraph about? What is the claim? Paragraph's purpose/focus/function.	Does the paragraph have a claim, evidence, analysis/explanation? Is it complete? Organized?

Body 2

What is the paragraph about? What is the claim? Paragraph's purpose/focus/function.	Does the paragraph have a claim, evidence, analysis/explanation? Is it complete? Organized?

Body 3

What is the paragraph about? What is the claim? Paragraph's purpose/focus/function.	Does the paragraph have a claim, evidence, analysis/explanation? Is it complete? Organized?

Body 4

What is the paragraph about? What is the claim? Paragraph's purpose/focus/function.	Does the paragraph have a claim, evidence, analysis/explanation? Is it complete? Organized?

- When you get to your conclusion, summarize what you said in one column. In the other column, list what the conclusion is doing. Think rhetorically about what conclusions are supposed to do – are you revisiting the main points and showing what they collectively prove about your topic? Are you addressing the larger implications of your topic? Here you can also think about what conclusions AREN'T supposed to include too...make sure you aren't dropping in new argument, new evidence, etc.



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Summarize what you said	What is the conclusion doing?
6. Switch your essay back to single column below the breakdown of your conclusion. Look through the essay PROMPT and list which components of the prompt you feel you adequately addressed and why. Then list which need more work, and why.	

7. Once you have completed the reverse outline template, **read through the breakdown below\*\***, then write a paragraph on what you learned, and what you will focus on in your revision.

### Breakdown of what the reverse outline does for you\*\*

- This process of summarizing each component (paragraph) of your argument helps you identify whether your paragraphs are unified and developed.
  - If you are unable to summarize each paragraph in a couple sentences, you most likely are trying to discuss too many topics in one paragraph. You will be able to use this identification to break up your topics into multiple paragraphs OR eliminate/move unrelated material.
  - If your summary is the same length as the paragraph, your paragraph is most likely underdeveloped. You will need to develop the ideas further or rearrange.
  - By summarizing each paragraph, you may actually create topic sentences that can clearly and succinctly present the material to the audience.
- An outline is a summary of your content; you can use to analyze, develop, and if necessary, improve your argument. For example:
  - Does each paragraph support or relate clearly to your thesis or main claim?
  - Does each paragraph flow logically, or does it seem very choppy or jumpy?
  - Do you repeat content or do paragraphs seem similar? Maybe they should be combined?
  - Do any paragraphs seem unrelated? Can they be tied in? If not, reconsider why they are there.
  - Are there gaps in the argument? Key words in the claim that do not appear in the outline? Maybe you need to add more ideas—or revise your claim.