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Reverse Outlines

Reverse Outlines: Take Apart Your Paper to Put it Back Together Right

Mathematics professors perennially offer this advice: check your work. Experienced math students use this process of reworking problems in reverse to check the steps they followed to arrive at their answers. You can use a similar process to improve your papers.

Many writers use a reverse outline to improve their written work. Just what is a reverse outline? A reverse outline is a process whereby you take away all of the supporting writing and are left with a paper's main points or main ideas, sometimes represented by your paper's topic sentences. It provides you with a bullet-point view of your paper's actual structure because you are not working with the plan (outline) you made before you wrote your paper, you're now looking at the plan (reverse outline) resulting from the paper you wrote.

You can use a reverse outline to take apart your paper and put it back together more effectively. Both reworking a math problem and producing a reverse outline revolve around verification of a produced result. A reverse outline differs because it allows writers to read a condensed version of a paper by focusing on its key

points or ideas but with the added benefit that a reverse outline makes it easier to revise a paper.

Thus if a typical **outline** represents a plan, then a **reverse outline** provides a clearer picture of how the writer carried out the plan in the paper.

A reverse outline can help you:

- Develop your argument
- Improve your organization or structure
- Determine whether your paper fulfills an assignment: answers the main question or completes the main intellectual task of a paper
- Refine your paper on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis

*****HOW TO MAKE A REVERSE OUTLINE**

1. REVIEW FOR A COMPLETE DRAFT

You'll get the most out of a reverse outline when you **work with a complete draft**. A reverse outline from a complete draft provides a clearer picture of the plan you carried out. In these pages, we'll discuss using a reverse outline to focus your revision efforts on your paper's body paragraphs. Strategies for Introductions and Conclusions can be found here on their own separate web pages.

2. CONSTRUCT THE SENTENCE SET

Here are four common ways to construct a reverse outline. Find a way that works for you. They all work: and they all start with a **sentence set**.

The Topic Sentence Way:

If every paragraph's first sentence (or **topic sentence**) provides a succinct version of the paragraph's argument, you are likely working with effective **topic sentences** in your paper (see Paragraphing). On a computer, copy and paste each topic sentence from the paper's body paragraphs into a separate, blank document in the order they appear in your paper. Otherwise, copy them out onto another blank piece of paper.

The One-Sentence Summary Way:

If the first sentence isn't an overview or main point of the paragraph, or if it's a transition sentence, then for each paragraph, produce a **one-sentence summary**, and copy and paste these sentences into a separate document following the order of the paragraphs in your paper. Each sentence should express the main point of the paragraph.

The Two-Sentence Subject and Function Way:

Some writers will prefer a more detailed approach to their reverse outline, and will choose a **two-sentence approach**. These writers may turn each paragraph into a two-sentence pair: the first sentence shows the paragraph's **subject** (its topic), and the second sentence shows the paragraph's **function** (to compare, to propose, to describe, to set up a cause, just to name several). Number and order them as they appear in your paper.

The Idea-by-Idea Way:

Sometimes it's useful to work through a more challenging draft by parsing out the ideas in each paragraph: what we may call the "units of thought" in each paragraph. It's ok if there is more than one idea in each paragraph. To avoid simply listing words

or partial thoughts, try to **express your ideas as complete sentences**. (See Paragraphing for paragraphs as units of thoughts/ideas.)

3. NUMBER THE SET

For ease of reference, number the set in order to check the balance or emphasis of sentences.

*****HOW TO USE A REVERSE OUTLINE**

No matter which of the four ways you use to create a reverse outline, you can use a reverse outline to strengthen your paper.

1. REVIEW THE RATIO OF PARAGRAPHS TO PAGES

One of the first uses for a reverse outline is also the easiest. Count your paragraphs and consider the ratio of paragraphs to written pages. By comparing total paragraphs to total pages, you can learn your average paragraph length, and you'll know right away whether your paragraphs are too long, too short, or just right for your paper.

2. REVIEW YOUR PAPER'S FOCUS OR BIG PICTURE

Your reverse outline will help you think more effectively about your paper's focus: its big picture. Does your sentence set reveal an argument or structure that shows the most effective approach for writing about your paper's subject?

For example: say you wrote a nine-paragraph history paper (again only including the body paragraphs) comparing the cultural contributions of the Ostrogoths and the Visigoths to European history. You examine your reverse outline and notice that six out of these nine paragraphs treat the Ostrogoths. Hey, what about the Visigoths? Well, depending on your paper's approach, this 2/3 versus 1/3 breakdown might be an effective approach, but you may need to explain why you chose this approach of using a weighted comparison (a.k.a., lens or keyhole approach) in your introduction. Otherwise, a reader might consider the amount of paragraphs treating each group to be uneven. If the assignment asks you to write a paper that gives even consideration to both groups, this 2/3 versus 1/3 breakdown will reveal an imbalance that you can address when you revise your paper.

3. REVIEW YOUR PAPER'S ORGANIZATION

You can use a reverse outline to review a paper's organization or structure and then make strategic choices for rearranging the paper on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis, or for adding or removing paragraphs to improve organization.

For example: consider the reverse outline you constructed for a paper about chronological observations on the spadix of the Titan Arum plant (*Amorphophallus titanum*, which can reach over 10 ft. in height, a.k.a. The Stinky Corpse Flower)—in a particular UW-Madison greenhouse where six have been successfully cultivated since 2001. Consider the order of the first five numbers of your sentence set. Are any sentences out of place?

- 1) In 2001, the spadix of the Titan Arum resembled a dessicated loaf of French bread; however, it proved a vital specimen.
- 2) In 2005, the spadix seemed more developed than in the last four years, which we surmise is a result of a warm spring.

- 3) In 2002, the Titan Arum had a perpetual series of orbiting flies as regular as satellites constantly circling its spadix.
- 4) The year 2003 saw the spadix known as the “Eiffel Tower” spadix, reaching a mature height of 3.5 meters.
- 5) In 2004, the spadix grew as expected, and grew to smell like a loaf of French bread that time had forgotten.

Besides noticing the sentence-level repetition, you can easily spot that number (2) in the sentence set is out of chronological order. Will it always be this clear how to spot a structural element that needs rethinking? No. However, with practice using a reverse outline, you’ll be able to review the order in which you present your research findings, how you’ve separated topics, or the sequence of evidence you analyze in a paper. A reverse outline can help you teach yourself how to present more logically structured arguments.

4. REVIEW EACH PARAGRAPH TO COMBINE OR DIFFERENTIATE PARAGRAPHS

Based on your sentence set, you can also use a reverse outline to revise individual paragraphs, typically by **combining** or **differentiating** paragraphs.

For example: read these two **topic sentences** that begin two separate consecutive paragraphs in a paper arguing about how people interact with wild animals as reflected in popular cinema. As you read, consider whether these two sentences present essentially the same point or significantly different points in support of an argument.

THE TWO ORIGINAL TOPIC SENTENCES

- 1) Although the two lions are now safely on display in Chicago’s Field Museum, the failed experience of dealing

- with the two “Tsavo Man-Eaters”—from the 1996 film *The Ghost and the Darkness*—ultimately proves the tragedy of our inability to coexist with this species in the wild.
- 2) Although glowing with warmth and wonder, the very popular 1966 *Born Free*, about raising and releasing the orphaned lioness Elsa, conceals our tragic, ultimate lack of any ability to live with lions in the wild.

If you encounter these two **topic sentences** in your reverse outline, you might revise the two paragraphs to produce a more effective paper. Consider the following two approaches.

Combine sentences.

You decide these two original topic sentences are treating the same point in each paragraph, and as a result, it might be beneficial to combine your paragraphs into one more evidence-rich, sophisticated paragraph.

A revised and **combined** topic sentence may look like this.

(New combined sentence)

Both the 1966 British drama *Born Free* and the 1996 historical adventure film *The Ghost and the Darkness* ultimately show us the error of our ways in our many attempts, peaceful and forceful, to live alongside lions in the wild.

In combining sentences (1) and (2) above, you develop a more accurate claim that a key part of your point concerns how all attempts, whether peaceful or forceful, result in the same failed experience with animals.

Differentiate sentences.

Another possibility is that the two original topic sentences are treating two different ideas. These two original topic sentences, in fact, do not effectively demonstrate that the two paragraphs are treating significantly different ideas. You might need to revise, or differentiate, each sentence so readers can better understand the important differences between these paragraphs.

A revise and **differentiated** set of topic sentences could look like this.

(New differentiated sentences)

- 1) Although the two lions are safely displayed in Chicago’s Field Museum, the failed experience of dealing with the two “Tsavo Man-Eaters”—as portrayed in the 1996 historical film *The Ghost and the Darkness*—ultimately reveals the tragic desire to eradicate this species in order to introduce human technology into the lions’ environment.

- 2) Although glowing with warmth and wonder, the very popular 1966 British drama *Born Free*, about raising and releasing the orphaned lioness Elsa, conceals our tragic inability to live with lions in the wild despite our efforts to save and preserve their species.

If you further differentiate sentences (1) and (2) above, you can more clearly draw sharper distinctions to show how human intentions play a role in how they choose to interact (what is “revealed” or “concealed”) in these interactions with a species in the wild.

5. REVIEW PARAGRAPHS TO KEEP OR CUT THEM

Based on your reverse outline, you can make productive decisions about whether to keep certain paragraphs or cut them from a draft.

For example: say you are writing a paper for an intermediate journalism class in which you are exploring the concept of how humans learn to trust technology through individual consumer choices and your research involves analyzing several television commercials for Apple computers and products.

- 1) Ever since their first breakthrough Super Bowl commercial of 1984 with the hammer thrower, people have seen siding with Apple Computers as a way of demonstrating their trust in technology: technology that appeals to our individuality.
- 2) Over time, Apple has introduced a variety of devices that appeal to our sense of individuality and in our need to connect with other individuals and to our world.
- 3) With the introduction of the iPod in 2001, Apple began an odyssey of exploring ways to win consumer trust in technology by focusing on how humans can determine the ways they choose to use the technology they purchase.
- 4) With the opening of Apple stores, Apple began to offer yet another way to explore our trust issues with technology through talking to friendly individual sales people in clean, well-lit stores.
- 5) In 2007, Apple rolls out the “Hi, I'm a Mac, and I'm a PC” TV commercials thus showing the funny side of Apple ads.
- 6) Recently, 2012 has seen an explosion of TV commercials from Apple that attempt to dazzle consumers with quirky and normal human behavior to show how it easy it is for consumer to maintain their individuality and to trust in Apple’s new technological offerings, most notably, the iPhone line.
- 7) Apple continues to explore the human connection with technology through their developments and applications of voice-activation and speech technology, which serve to bring out a more intimate, individual experience with their technology.

Take a look at this reverse outline above. What do you see? Most sentences address some aspect of how human trust evolves with Apple's technological developments, and these choices are individual choices.

However, sentence (5) stands out: Why? Sentence (5), based on the **topic sentence**, only treats the humor without connecting the way humor can help us alleviate some of our trust issues with technology as individual consumers. What can you do? As the writer, you may need to revise the paragraph to directly connect with the paper's argument, or, if you determine that the paragraph is serving an important part of your paper's argument, then you may merely need to revise **topic sentence** (5), perhaps like this:

In 2007, Apple rolls out the “Hi, I'm a Mac, and I'm a PC” TV commercials, and by promoting their funny side, Apple ads help another generation of consumers get over their “trust issues” with Macs by personifying the choices they make as individual personality types and the technologies they are willing to trust.

Experienced writers, especially when writing longer papers about a complex subject, need ways to test their drafts for the logical sequence of points, its structure. A reverse outline provides any writer with one good way to examine and produce a successful paper.