

## **Flip It and Reverse It: A Guide to Reverse Outlines**

Some things just don't function well in reverse. Take waterfalls, or the digestive system. Luckily for writers, outlines are not one of those things. They are equally useful in both "forward" and "reverse" forms. If the thought of a reverse outline makes you feel turned around, don't worry. This guide will point you in the right direction!

### **What is a reverse outline and why is it useful?**

A reverse outline is similar to a regular outline. Both are tools that help writers identify and organize the main ideas in a piece of writing. The big difference is that a regular outline is used before the drafting process, whereas a reverse outline is used after the draft is completed. The advantage of a reverse outline is that it provides a concise overview of your argument and reveals potential weaknesses in the structure and presentation.

### **Creating a Reverse Outline**

Once you have finished writing a draft, go to the beginning of the paper and number each paragraph (1, 2, 3...). On a separate sheet of paper (or using the template on back of these instructions) write the same sequence of numbers and, next to each number, write the main idea of the corresponding paragraph (i.e. #1 corresponds to the main idea of the first paragraph, #2 corresponds to the main idea of the second paragraph, and so on). The end result will be a numbered series of sentences that, when read in sequence, provide an overview of your argument. You have now created a basic reverse outline.

### **Getting the Most from Your Reverse Outline**

As you read through your reverse outline, ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the main argument of your paper?
- Do you have a strong thesis statement that reflects your argument?
- Do the main ideas of each paragraph all speak to the larger argument?
- Are the paragraphs properly organized or should they be rearranged? In other words, does the main idea of each paragraph logically fit with the ideas before and after it?
- Are there multiple "main ideas" in a single paragraph?
- Does each paragraph have a strong topic sentence that reflects the main idea?
- Do the rest of the sentences in the paragraph speak to the topic sentence and are the sentences properly arranged?

If all goes well, your reverse outline will reveal an argument with strong, well supported ideas that logically flow from one to another. Then again, you may notice that some of your ideas could be rearranged for greater clarity. Your reverse outline might even show that some ideas don't really fit with the rest of the paper and should be eliminated altogether. Regardless of the outcome, creating a reverse outline will have helped you move forward with your project!

**Reverse Outline Template**

Create a basic reverse outline by filling in the sections below. Evaluate your outline using the questions on the front side of this handout.

**Thesis/Main Argument:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Paragraph #1 Main Idea:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Relation to Main Argument: \_\_\_\_\_  
Evidence: \_\_\_\_\_

**Paragraph #2 Main Idea:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Relation to Main Argument: \_\_\_\_\_  
Evidence: \_\_\_\_\_

**Paragraph #3 Main Idea:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Relation to Main Argument: \_\_\_\_\_  
Evidence: \_\_\_\_\_

**Paragraph #4 Main Idea:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Relation to Main Argument: \_\_\_\_\_  
Evidence: \_\_\_\_\_

**Paragraph #5 Main Idea:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Relation to Main Argument: \_\_\_\_\_  
Evidence: \_\_\_\_\_