Reverse Outlines: A Writer's Technique for Examining Organization

Many writers use a reverse outline to check their work. Reverse outlining 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. Your reverse outline provides a bullet-point view of your paper's structure because you are looking at the main points of the paper you wrote.

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 allows writers to read a condensed version of what they wrote, and provides one good way to examine and produce a successful paper.

A reverse outline can help you:
- Determine if your paper meets its goal
- Discover places to expand on your evidence or analysis
- See where readers might be tripped up by your organization or structure

How to create a reverse outline

1. **Start with a complete draft** to have a fuller picture of the plan you carried out. You can use a partial draft to review the organization of the paragraphs you have written so far.
2. **Construct the outline** by listing the main idea of each paragraph in your draft in a blank document. If a paragraph's topic sentence provides a succinct version of the paragraph's argument, you can paste that sentence into the outline as a summary for that paragraph. Otherwise, write a **one-sentence summary** to express the main point of the paragraph.
3. **Number your list** for ease of reference.

Use your reverse outline to answer questions

**Does every paragraph relate back to your main idea?**

Your reverse outline will help you think more effectively about your paper's focus: its big picture. Does every item on your list relate back to your main point?

Many writers find that new ideas or topics appear near the end of a reverse outline. These topic shifts may signal that you need to revise certain paragraphs in your draft to be sure they relate back to your main idea, or they may inspire you to revise your main idea so it takes on some of the new points these paragraphs suggest.

By viewing the structure of your paper from the vantage of a reverse outline, you can make productive decisions about whether to keep certain paragraphs or cut them from a draft.

**Where might a reader have trouble following the order of your ideas?**

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.

**Do several of your paragraphs repeat one idea?**

If your reverse outline shows two paragraphs that make similar points, consider combining them or revising one so that it does not make too similar a point.
**Does one paragraph juggle several topics?**

If one item on your reverse outline discusses more topics than other paragraphs, that may be a paragraph your reader will struggle to follow. By dividing its topics into two or more paragraphs, each one discussing a more focused topic or set of topics, you may be able to ensure that your reader follows your meaning.

**Are your paragraphs too long? Too short?**

By comparing total paragraphs to total pages, you can learn your average paragraph length and more easily spot paragraphs that are unusually long or short.

**An example of a reverse outline**

For example: say you are writing a paper for an engineering 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 Apple's 1984 Super Bowl commercial, customers have seen Apple as creating 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 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. Apple's more recent TV commercials 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.