Revision time? Try a reverse outline!

Among the many ways to approach revision, reverse outlining can help you determine whether or not

- ☑ **paragraphs relate to each other and the larger topic**
- ☑ **organization is logical**
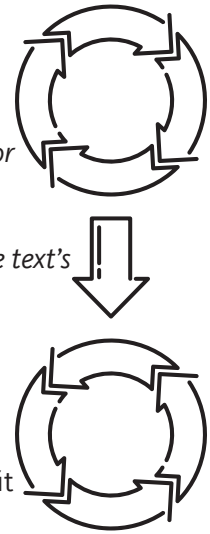- ☑ **the thesis is referred to** throughout the writing

When you reverse outline, you *identify the main ideas from each paragraph of your paper* in order to highlight the structure and organization. Try it as a part of your revision process, or use the approach to help break down a reading to better understand its content and meaning!

How to create a reverse outline:

With a reverse outline, the goal is to turn your essay into a simple list of bullet points. Each bulleted point should list the main topic of one paragraph. Here's how:

- **Identify the thesis and topic** (*remember: as you revise, you may change the thesis or adjust the focus in each paragraph*).
- **Read one paragraph at a time.**
- **Write the main point or idea of each paragraph** (*on a separate document or in the text's margin*).
- Once you've completed your reverse outline, **evaluate the main idea from each paragraph** for relevance, organizational sequence, or any missing/extra information.

If it's difficult to identify a paragraph's main ideas, there may be too many competing ideas. Or, you might see that there are too few ideas in a paragraph and it would benefit from being combined with another paragraph.

A completed reverse outline may look something like this:

Claim/Thesis: *Cats make better pets than dogs.*

Paragraph 1: *Introduction & thesis statement*

Paragraph 2: *Cats are lower maintenance and more affordable.*
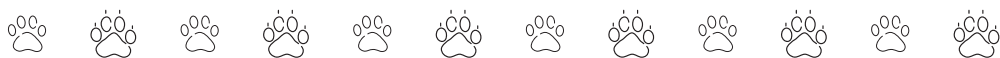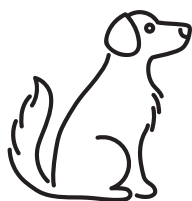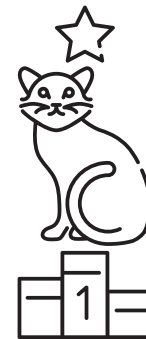
Paragraph 3: *Cats tend to be quieter and sleep more compared to dogs.*

Paragraph 4: *The history and trends of household pets in America.*

Paragraph 5: *Cats are small and can hunt at night with enhanced night vision.*

Paragraph 6: *Rebuttal that cats can't be as loyal of companions as dogs.*

Paragraph 7: *Conclusion*

In the example, **Paragraph 4** seems outside of the scope of the thesis, and it's unclear how it relates to the paragraphs before/after it. **Paragraph 5** also may be relevant, but may need to be evaluated for its relationship to the thesis. **Paragraph 6** implies a counterargument, about dogs, but it's not yet clear where that counterargument is shared in the text.

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So you've got a reverse outline – now what?

Now that you can see how your paragraphs are working together, you can engage with your reverse outline by asking yourself questions like the ones below. Use your answers to inform your revision process and identify what might need some attention:

★ **Do the body paragraphs refer back to or support the thesis statement**? If not, what needs to happen so that they do? Do the paragraphs change, or does the thesis get edited?

★ **Does the first sentence of each paragraph signal the paragraph's topic and purpose? Does the last sentence provide a conclusion and transition to the next paragraph**? How can they be edited to make sure they do?

★ **Where might a reader have trouble following the order of ideas**? What information does a reader need to know in order to understand the paragraphs that follow??

★ **Do any paragraphs repeat the same idea**? If so, where does it make the most sense to include that information?

★ **Does any paragraph tackle too many ideas at once**? How might that paragraph be broken up into separate, focused paragraphs? Or, do some ideas belong in other paragraphs?

★ **Do the thesis and concluding statements make the same argument**? If not, what needs to be edited/adjusted?

Use your answers to inform your revision process and identify what might need some attention!

. . . .

Reverse outlining for note-taking?!

Yes! You can create a reverse-outline as a note-taking method for research! The process is the same: create a bulleted list of each paragraph's main idea. You can reflect on the following questions as a part of your process:

★ What is the **purpose** of this paragraph? What does the writer accomplish with it?
★ How does this paragraph **relate to the writer's main argument**?
★ How does this paragraph **relate to my research topic**?

Notes in reverse-outline form can be quickly scanned to remind you of a source's main ideas and potential relationship to your research and draft.

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