

Reverse Outlining

A reverse outline is an outline made from a finished draft. While an outline you create *before* you start to write might be very detailed, a reverse outline simply lists the main point of each paragraph. Thus, it provides you with a quick overview of your paper's essential structure and will help you revise. Reverse outlines might reveal holes in your paper's content or argument, interruptions or awkward transitions in the flow of ideas, an ineffective structure, and/or redundancies.

How to make a reverse outline

1. Number the **paragraphs** in your text. If you are working with a long paper over 10 pages, like a Hausarbeit or your thesis, it is best to work in sections or chapters.
2. On a separate sheet of paper, make a numbered list and **summarize** each paragraph in one sentence next to its corresponding number.
3. (Optional) You might also note which **function** each paragraph fulfills in your text. Describe in one sentence how the paragraph, for example, supports your central argument, establishes necessary theoretical context, or presents a counterargument.

Example

Paragraph no.	Summary	Function
5	<i>A study shows that high prices in cafeterias negatively affect the test performances of bachelor students.</i>	<i>This paragraph gives evidence for the claim that academic success is influenced by social factors.</i>

How to use your reverse outline

You can use the finished outline to analyze the overall structural coherence and organizational flow of your text as well as the internal coherence of each paragraph.

Structural coherence

- *When you assess the outline, is it difficult to identify a common theme?*
 - ➔ Make sure every paragraph is supporting your central claim or answering your research question. You may need to change the order of paragraphs, write more transitional passages, or write new paragraphs.
- *Do some paragraphs presume information that isn't explained until later in the text?*
 - ➔ Change the order of paragraphs or signpost to your reader that you will explain the issue later in the paper.
- *Do several paragraphs seem to be making the same point?*

- reassess the paragraphs to find if there are nuanced differences in their main points and rewrite them to express this difference explicitly,
- combine them to reduce redundancies.

Internal coherence

- *Does a paragraph not seem to have a main point, or its main point is not explicit?*
 - rewrite the paragraph so that its main point is explicit and prominently placed at the beginning of the paragraph.
- *Did you find it difficult to write a precise summary of the paragraph, or does a paragraph clearly have more than one main point?*
 - divide the paragraph into two or more paragraphs to give each idea enough space to develop.
- *Is it difficult for you to describe a paragraph's function to the central purpose of your paper?*
 - reassess the relevance of the paragraph; if it's not helping you achieve the central aim of your paper, cut it out!
- *Is it clear how the paragraph relates to or progresses your central argument?*
 - not, make it explicit! Arguments articulated in paragraphs should be clearly supportive of the paper's central claim. If you are bringing up an opposing viewpoint as a counter argument, make this explicit, as well.

Works cited:

Hall, Helen C.W.: *The Writer's Handbook. The Writing Center of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.* <https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/process/reverseoutlines/>

Concept for the handout: Geothe University Schreibzentrum, Frankfurt a. M. 2021.