

Reverse Outlining

While outlining is a strategy for organizing content before you write an essay, reverse outlining is a process for assessing a draft you have already written. It's a way to test the piece for coherence, notice missing pieces of your argument, and locate redundancies or gaps in the flow of ideas.

To reverse outline your text, read one paragraph at a time and write down two things:

1. What the paragraph is saying — the contents, the information it presents
2. What the paragraph is doing — its purpose or function within the essay

Along the way, or looking at the outline as a whole, keep in mind what a reader might be thinking. Is each new paragraph preceded with enough contextual or foundational information? Do you talk about the same thing in the same way in multiple places? Are any important ideas or explanations left out? Through this process, you'll be able to see what's already successful and where your draft needs work, then rearrange and fill in the gaps accordingly.

In the sample below, we write what each paragraph is *saying* in the left margin and what it is *doing* in the right margin.

Abstract from <i>Passage of Rites: History and Prospectus of Promenade Architecture</i>, Shannon N. Stark, Landscape Architecture 2010		
Description of a critical issue	Contemporary urban American teenage culture is characterized by its interiority. It is suggested that the decrease in time teens are spending outdoors results in Nature Deficit Disorder, impairing their cognitive, psychological and physical development. In lieu of the evidence that indicates the importance of exposure to the landscape during our formative teenage years, this thesis begins to identify the evolution of the disconnect and opportunities for (re)exposure to the urban landscape.	Introduces the problem and how the thesis examines/addresses it
Description of a commonality between past and present	The act of promenading, walking for display with the intention of being observed and observing, has long been associated with adolescence and characterized as a coming of age activity. Where it once was sited in the landscape on the promenade, it now occurs in the insular, anemic architecture of the American shopping mall.	Makes the connection that leads to solutions
Thesis method for finding solutions	The mall is both an architectural and etymological derivative of "promenade." Examination of mall and promenade precedents informed a hybridized landscape/architecture of the shopping mall that encourages existing adolescent behavior to be sited outside.	Suggests impact of thesis on the problem and relevance to the field

Looking at this sample, think about the questions above. What do you think is working for the structure of the essay? Would you add or change anything?

Sometimes it helps to create your reverse outline on a separate page, so you can easily compare all the paragraphs. Below are two models for doing so, based on different example texts. Try applying the same questions as practice assessing reverse outlines.

Outline Format

Grant Application Essay Reverse Outline

Paragraph 1

Saying: Anecdote about cooking for my community; my idea for creating a community kitchen
 Doing: Enticing introduction, gets the reader interested in my project

Paragraph 2

Saying: Explanation of how the community kitchen would work
 Doing: Practical overview, describes my concept

Paragraph 3

Saying: Context around the topic, research around the role of food in community
 Doing: Makes my idea relevant and mirrors the funder's goals and mission

Paragraph 4

Saying: How this specific community would benefit from the community kitchen
 Doing: Reveals what's at stake, the potential impact and deeper purpose

Paragraph 5

Saying: Chronological breakdown of the project and budget
 Doing: Makes it clear and shows it's feasible

Paragraph 6

Saying: Description of skills I gained from previous related work
 Doing: Demonstrates that I'm capable and prepared for all aspects of the project

Paragraph 7

Saying: Community kitchen as necessary next step in my work and related to/advancing my field
 Doing: Conclusion, points to greater significance

Chart Format

Formal Analysis Essay Reverse Outline		
Paragraph	What it says	What it does
1	Describes the piece; controlling idea	Introduces artwork, focus of essay
2	Details color in the piece as evidence of harmony and excitement	Description and analysis
3	Details line in the piece as evidence of memory/sense over reality/accuracy	Description and analysis
4	Details effect of material as evidence of conflating the real and unreal, like memory or dream	Description and analysis, builds off previous paragraph
5	Gives overall impression as inviting, but out of reach; scale as further evidence	Conclusion on piece as a whole

You can use the blank chart on the following page to fill in your own reverse outline.

Reverse outline for my essay:		
Paragraph	What it says	What it does
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		
11		
12		