I downloaded these two blog posts from “Explorations of Style” by Rachael Cayley, an associate professor at the Graduate Center for Academic Communication at the University of Toronto

# Reverse Outlines

# https://explorationsofstyle.com/2011/02/09/reverse-outlines/

My favourite revision strategy is the **reverse outline**. Simply stated, a reverse outline is an outline that we create from an existing text; rather than turning an outline into a text, we are turning a text into an outline. Regardless of whether or not you create an outline before you write, creating one after you have written a first draft can be invaluable. A reverse outline will reveal the structure—and thus the structural problems—of a text.

The steps to creating a reverse outline are simple:

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| **1** | **Number the paragraphs** |
| **2** | **Identify the topic of each paragraph** |
| **3** | **Arrange these topics into an outline** |
| **4** | **Analyze this outline** |
| **5** | **Create a revised outline** |
| **6** | **Reorganize the text according to the revised outline** |
| **7** | **Check for topic sentences and cohesion** |

**Step 1: Number the paragraphs**  
The basic unit of a reverse outline is the [paragraph](https://explorationsofstyle.com/2011/02/16/paragraphs/), so the first step is to number the paragraphs. The simple act of directing our attention towards paragraphs—and thus away from sentences—can be helpful: while writers naturally focus on sentences, we must always remember that our readers are naturally inclined to [focus on paragraphs](https://explorationsofstyle.com/2013/10/17/what-are-your-paragraphs-doing-for-you/).

**Step 2: Identify the topic of each paragraph**  
Once the paragraphs have been numbered, try to identify a topic in each one. Since you are looking at an early draft, this process will be challenging: not all paragraphs will have topics and not all topics will be expressed neatly in a single paragraph. When doing a reverse outline, it is crucial to remember that you are trying to make evident what is there rather than [what ought to be there](https://explorationsofstyle.com/2013/08/29/truth-in-outlining/). In other words, this step is diagnostic. You are simply noting what each paragraph was trying to do, for better or worse. Once you’ve done that, you can observe whether topic sentences can be found and make a note of paragraph length. Again, at this stage, you are observing rather than judging or remedying. Does the paragraph have a topic sentence? Yes or no? And how long is the paragraph? The latter can be recorded in word count or in more qualitative terms as short, average, or long.

**Step 3: Arrange these topics into an outline**   
To create this preliminary outline, you are doing nothing more than listing the topics that you’ve identified, paragraph by paragraph. The crucial thing at this stage is to leave your original text alone and work just on the outline; you are trying to keep yourself away from the muddling effect of the detailed content in your own writing. As an [advocate for your future reader](https://explorationsofstyle.com/2011/01/26/understanding-the-needs-of-your-reader-2/), you are trying to see past the detail and look just at essential structure.

**Step 4: Analyze this outline**  
The next step is to analyze this outline, paying particular attention to the logic  and proportionality of your internal organization. Understanding the logic involves observing the way elements have been placed in relation to one another. Understanding the proportionality involves observing how much space is being devoted to each element. This step is the bridge between noting what you have and preparing to create something new.

**Step 5: Create a revised outline**  
During steps 3 and 4, you’ve been working with a list of topics; in step 5, you will have to transform that list into a genuine outline. Now that you can see all the topics and can start to see possible weaknesses in either your ordering of points or your allocation of space, you are ready to create a better outline for the text. You have the best of both worlds at this point: you know a great deal that you didn’t know [before you started writing](https://explorationsofstyle.com/2011/01/12/using-writing-to-clarify-your-own-thinking/), but you are still working at a level of abstraction that will keep you from getting bogged down in the details.

**Step 6: Reorganize the text according to the revised outline**  
Here comes the hard part. In steps 3, 4, and 5, you’ve been working with the outline. Now it’s time to use this new outline to transform the text. And unless you are an incredibly confident writer, you will find this scary. That initial draft—even with all the flaws that you’ve just uncovered—will generally have a real hold on you. That hold comes from the legitimate fear that you might take away existing coherence and flow without being able to replace it with something better. At this point, you need faith, faith in the new outline and faith in your ability to transform your text into something better. Practically, what you do here is move the text around to reflect the organization of the new outline. The result, at this point, can be pretty rough. If you take a few paragraphs from the second half of a paper, for instance, and move them up to an earlier section, they can’t possibly sit right. The time for massaging everything into a cohesive whole will come, but for now you must trust that the new outline has allowed you to devise a new and improved configuration of your text.

**Step 7: Check for topic sentences and cohesion**  
The final step is to pay attention to the way your new paragraphs work. The new and improved configuration will be, needless to say, both better and worse. It will be better because it will reflect your careful and clearheaded analysis of what it needs to do; it will be worse because it will still bear too many traces of its earlier self. To get a head start on the [next stages of revision](https://explorationsofstyle.com/2014/12/18/the-craft-of-revision/), you can identify whether you have topic sentences early in your paragraphs and whether those paragraphs use their length effectively to develop clear topics. While there will still be lots of work to do, you can turn to that work secure in the knowledge that you have created an effective structure for this text. Polishing a text is [time-consuming work](https://explorationsofstyle.com/2014/10/15/topic-sentence-paragraphs/), but it is easier and more efficient when you are working on a text that you know to be well-organized and well-proportioned.

In sum, the reverse outline is an effective strategy because it can create an objective distance between you and your text. Reverse outlining gives us a way into a text that might otherwise resist our editorial efforts. We often find our [early drafts disconcerting](https://explorationsofstyle.com/2011/01/19/committing-to-extensive-revision/): we know they are flawed but changing them can still seem risky. A reverse outline can give us purpose and direction as we undertake the valuable project of restructuring our written work.

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**Literature Reviews and Reverse Outlines**

**https://explorationsofstyle.com/2012/09/13/literature-reviews-and-reverse-outlines/**

After a recent discussion of reverse outlines on Twitter, I had a flurry of visits to my [reverse outlines](https://explorationsofstyle.com/2011/02/09/reverse-outlines/) post. The Twitter conversation concerned reverse outlining as a way to help with literature reviews, so I thought it might be useful to spell out that connection more explicitly. A reverse outline is a great way to address the most common flaws of lit reviews: poor organization and poor articulation of research goals. These two issues are closely connected, but I am going to discuss them in turn.

I’m sure I don’t need to describe how poor organization bedevils lit reviews; the sheer volume of the material makes organizational difficulties near inevitable. The organizational scheme that you must devise is also a genuinely conceptually complex task. It is not like organizing your sock drawer; organizing your lit review requires a deep understanding of your project *and* its connection to the existing literature in your field. While a reverse outline won’t magic away difficulties, it will help you to confront the limitations of your early drafts. The beauty of a reverse outline is that it prunes away the distracting details, allowing you to see the underlying structure.

Let’s look at a sample reverse outline in order to get a sense of how this might work. As you likely know, the unit of analysis in a reverse outline is the [paragraph](https://explorationsofstyle.com/2011/02/16/paragraphs/). We number each paragraph and then ask ourselves some basic questions: What is the topic? Is there a topic sentence? Does the whole paragraph have thematic unity? For a more detailed explanation of this process, you can go back to the original [reverse outlines](https://explorationsofstyle.com/2011/02/09/reverse-outlines/) post.)

**Sample Reverse Outline:**

**1. The research into X**  
• However, there are also a few sentences on Y.  
• No topic sentence found (although this might be okay if the whole paragraph functions as an introduction to a particular topic).

**2. The historical background to X**  
• No topic sentence found.  
• The paragraph is purely chronological with no thematic starting point.

**3. The work of Singh and Johnson, who also study X**  
• No topic sentence found.

**4. The main study that Singh and Johnson were responding to**• No topic sentence found.

**5. The work of Gordonberg, who works on Z**  
• There is a clear topic sentence on Gordonberg, but no mention of Z or any link to what came before.

When we look at this reverse outline, the absence of detail helps us to see some basic problems. The truth is that many of us could have found those problems in the original if we’d read it. But chances are that we would have missed those problems in our own writing, the familiarity of which tends to lull us into a kind of editorial somnambulance. In my experience, that sleepy acceptance is often accompanied by an underlying uneasiness, but discomfort alone doesn’t break the spell. A reverse outline can be like a bucket of cold water. Often my first reaction to my own reverse outlines is ‘huh?’. *Why did I put those things there? Those points are in the wrong order! That is the completely wrong organizational approach to that material!* It may not be as bad as all that, but the evident weaknesses of the outline give me a sense that whatever I was trying to accomplish may not yet be working on the page. I can then start to rework at the outline level without being distracted by familiar chains of words or complex details.

**Revised Sample Reverse Outline:**

**1. The importance of X, Y, and Z to my research project**  
• This paragraph will serve as an introduction to the subsequent discussion of X, Y, and Z, so may not have an obvious topic sentence.  
• This paragraph may be short or long—or may even need to be broken into multiple paragraphs—depending on how difficult it is to establish the relevance of this topic to your research.

**2. The research into X**  
• This could be more than one paragraph, of course, depending on the amount of material.  
• The first version had a historical background paragraph; if that topic does warrant its own paragraph, think about whether you will be giving similar historical background to Y and Z. Another possibility would be that you need a *combined* historical background to X, Y, and Z; it is very common to speak about the historical background in a more unified way before dividing the field into its important sub-fields. As a simple example, consider the following sequence of sentences: ‘Serious scholarly attention to [topic] began in …’/‘For the next twenty years, scholars tended to …’/‘By the mid-1980s, however, a serious rupture began to emerge about …’/‘In subsequent years, the scholarly approach was often divided into X, Y, and Z’.  
• What about Singh and Johnson? Were they included as an example of the work done on X? Are other thinkers being included? Why are they so important? Is the study that *they* are responding to important for you or is it just important for them?

**3. The research into Y**  
• Try to follow whatever pattern you have established with your discussion of X; the length can vary, but the reader will expect X, Y, and Z to be treated in a roughly parallel fashion. If that parallel structure proves hard to sustain as you are writing, you may need to revisit your initial structural scheme.

**4. The research into Z**  
• The discussion of Z should follow the broad pattern established in the discussion of X and Y.

As you’ve probably noticed, the modifications in the reworked outline also address the second common flaw in lit reviews, the tendency of authors to obscure their own research goals. Singh and Johnson may be significant researchers in their own right, but the reader can always go directly to them for their research. What the reader needs from you is a clear explanation of the way that the existing research serves as a backdrop or source or inspiration for your own. The reworked outline is stronger because it is better organized but also because it links each paragraph into the broader agenda of the author.

In their valuable book [*Helping Doctoral Students Write*](http://www.amazon.ca/Helping-Doctoral-Students-Write-Supervision/dp/0415346843), Kamler and [Thomson](http://patthomson.wordpress.com/) give a great collection of student metaphors for lit review writing (pp. 32–34). In my thesis writing course, I usually read those metaphors aloud to students and ask which one most closely represents each of their experiences. My favourite is the image of someone trying to put an octopus into a bottle. A reverse outline can be a way to convince your octopus to coordinate all its limbs in service of your research plan.