Reverse outlining is a strategy to help you clarify the structure and main ideas of an essay draft and create a plan for revising it. You’ll need a blank document and a (printed or digital) copy of your essay draft.

1. Number each of your paragraphs, and identify the topic of each paragraph in a few words. Create a numbered list, with each paragraph’s topic next to the corresponding number. This is the skeleton for your reverse outline.

2. Below each topic, write the main idea of the paragraph: what point are you trying to make about this topic? Try to re-state that point (rather than reusing a line from the essay) in one sentence.
   - If there are multiple points in a single paragraph, write all of them down—you’ll want to come back to this later.

3. Within each paragraph, look for quotes, statistics, stories, summaries of research, concrete examples, or other evidence that support your main point. Note these pieces of evidence on your reverse outline.
   - Have you included in-text citations for evidence from outside sources?
   - If you have not included evidence or an example, make a note of that.

4. Next, look at the overall structure of your essay. Identify the introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion of your paper, and label them in your reverse outline. If one of these parts is missing, make a note of that. (See the Basic Essay Format handout from Utah Valley University for more information on structuring a paper.)

5. Make a plan for how to revise your paper based on your reverse outline. Try asking yourself the following questions:
   - Were there any paragraphs where you struggled to identify the topic or main idea?
   - Were there any paragraphs that had more than one main idea? See if you can split them so that each paragraph focuses on just one point.
• Were there any main ideas that lacked supporting evidence? Do you need to do additional research or pull more examples from your sources to back up your argument?

• Are the topics in a logical order? Would your essay flow better if you reordered some of the paragraphs?

• Was the introduction or conclusion missing from your essay? (For help with writing these sections of your paper, try the following resources from UNC-Chapel Hill: Introductions and Conclusions.)

(Optional) If you want to go further, try the following steps to create a more detailed outline:

6. Look at how you evaluate or explain each piece of evidence, and note that in your outline.
   • What do you want the reader to understand, think, or feel about this quote/example/statistic?
   • How does this evidence support your main argument?
   • Are your quotes “sandwiched”? That is, do you introduce the quote with your own words and follow the quote with an explanation of its importance?
   • If you have not included an evaluation, make a note of that.

7. Look at the structure of each of your paragraphs.
   • Does the first sentence, or another clear sentence, in each paragraph capture the main idea of the paragraph?
   • Does your introduction contain a thesis statement? The thesis statement is a sentence that states the main idea of the essay and outlines your supporting points; it’s often located near the end of the introduction. Take a look at Utah Valley University’s Thesis Statements handout if you need a refresher.
   • Where useful, does the final sentence of each paragraph tie together the ideas in the paragraph?
   • Do you have smooth transitions between paragraphs, connecting each idea to the next?