



Reverse Outlining: Organizing What You've Written

Sometimes it's hard to know whether your essay is accomplishing what you want it to. Or you might start to feel a little unsure about where you're going once you've started writing. This happens, but reverse outlining can help you to work through those issues and get organized. It's simple, fast, and helpful for narrowing down what exactly you want to talk about and how to organize it to make sure you're truly writing what you want to say.

What is reverse outlining?

In reverse outlining, you write out only the main points of your paper so you can look at those more clearly. By taking away the distractions of anything else you've written, reverse outlining allows you to look at your paper in a really simple form. Let's look at how you might do this.

Step 1: Write out your main argument as simply as possible.

This way you can make sure you're staying with what you truly want to argue, so if you already have a thesis for your paper, write that down. Or write down your main argument with a new sentence or just a few words. Try not to worry about the wording. As long as you write what you want to talk about in your paper, you're doing it right!

Example – Main argument: Mint chip ice cream is the best flavor of ice cream.

Step 2: Summarize the ideas in your existing paragraphs.

Now that you've re-examined what you want to prove, look at what your current body paragraphs say. Only look at what each paragraph is **truly** arguing – not what you want it to say (that's the next step!). Look at your topic sentences, evidence, and analysis to get a sense of each paragraph, and then ask "On its own, what exactly is this paragraph saying?" Sum up what each body paragraph discusses in one sentence so you can look at its idea in a simple form.

Example ctd.

Body Paragraph 1: Mint chip ice cream is the best flavor because of its fresh taste.

Body Paragraph 2: Mint chip ice cream is the best flavor because of its fun color.

Body Paragraph 3: Ice cream is the best type of dessert.

Step 3: Check if those summaries match what you want to say.

In the previous step you may have discovered that some of your paragraphs aren't quite focusing on what you thought. For example, you might notice that one paragraph drifts away from the main argument you're trying to make. If that's true, take a look at your thesis again and break it down into parts without relying on your current organization or division of ideas. Consider what you think would be most effective, even if it's different from what you currently have, and write new sentences that will serve as a guide for the focus of each paragraph. These sentences can also be great templates for your topic sentences.

In Step 2's example, I saw that my third paragraph on ice cream being the best dessert doesn't really connect to any part of my thesis/main argument. Even though it's related to my subject, through this process I could see that the idea doesn't really work to prove that mint chip is the best flavor – it's analyzing ice cream in general instead of what flavor within the category of ice cream is best. Removing that section ensures that my essay focuses entirely on proving my argument as stated in my thesis.

Example ctd.

Body Paragraph 1: Mint chip ice cream is the best flavor because of its fresh taste.

Body Paragraph 2: Mint chip ice cream is the best flavor because of its fun color.

Body Paragraph 3: Mint chip ice cream is the best flavor because of its compatibility with toppings.

Step 4: Match any evidence or ideas to the right paragraph.

Once you've considered or re-considered the organization of your paper, you can start to match your pieces of evidence and analysis with the right paragraphs. For example, when working on Step 3, you may have found that some of the evidence in one paragraph should really be in a different section. You can now summarize each idea to see more clearly whether or not it's aligned with a paragraph's topic sentence (or, if you haven't gotten that far yet, you can use your new summary to write one). This helps ensure that you stay focused within each paragraph and that each piece of evidence is matched with the point it proves best. Again, try to write out the main point of the idea or evidence as succinctly as you can so that you can view it more clearly.



Example ctd.

Body Paragraph 1: Mint chip ice cream is the best flavor because of its fresh taste.

- mint is refreshing
- the light amount of chocolate helps to balance the mint

Body Paragraph 2: Mint chip ice cream is the best flavor because of its fun color.

- the green color makes mint chip stand out
- a lot of other ice creams look the same
- mint chip's uniqueness makes it better

Body Paragraph 3: Mint chip ice cream is the best flavor because of its compatibility with toppings.

- mint chip goes with chocolate sauce
- mint chip goes with whipped cream
- mint chip goes with sprinkles

And there you have it – a reverse outline for your paper! As you go back to your writing, you can see things you want to adjust to strengthen it, such as your thesis, topic sentences, or organization. This can also help you develop a plan for anything else you want to include. With this outline, you'll know more exactly how you want to write your paper, and you can look back at this simplified form to stay on track.

Do this at any point in the writing process – it's never too late to gain some clarity!