

REVISING WITH REVERSE OUTLINES

While most novice writers understand the importance of editing their work before submitting it, many are unaware that this process is distinct from revising and may lack knowledge on how to effectively revise. Put simply, the difference between editing and revising is that while editing primarily deals with minor, surface-level modifications, revision literally means “to see again” and involves re-examining the writing with a fresh perspective. For humanities papers, some of the kinds of changes you can expect to make in the revision stage include narrowing or broadening the argument to match the ideas communicated in the paragraphs, splitting or combining paragraphs, or “straightening out” an essay that has veered off topic, to name a few.

An initial challenge for some writers is that they may not know where to revise because they don’t know what to identify as problematic. It can be difficult to anticipate readers’ challenges with understanding your writing—as the writer, you have a special insight into your paper’s intentions that surpasses what any reader can comprehend. While you probably have a clear grasp of your intended purpose in each paragraph and may not notice any weak connections, your readers may struggle to bridge logical gaps. This can make it challenging to foresee the questions or confusion your readers might have.

Reverse outlining for paragraph function and cohesion is a commonly used strategy for evaluating the soundness of one’s own writing because it can uncover those weaknesses that might escape your notice. To reverse outline your draft, you can use the Reverse Outline Template on this handout (or simply use the margin of your document) to outline the main idea, or function, of each section or paragraph. It’s best to use just a short phrase for each paragraph. If you find it difficult to express the main idea in a short phrase, that may be an indicator that the paragraph needs to undergo revision. This process helps you see the overall structure of your piece more clearly and in a simplified view that is easier to manage and reorganize. This outline makes it easier to expose logical gaps and paragraphs that veer off topic.

Reverse outlining also provides a good opportunity to examine the topic sentences of your paragraphs. Use this process to ensure that your topic sentences align with what you have identified as the main idea or function of each paragraph.

The following questions are things you can consider as you work on your reverse outline:

- Does my essay respond appropriately to the writing prompt, or does it go off track?
- Is there redundancy in my essay/am I exploring the same idea in different paragraphs?
- Do any of my paragraphs explore more than one idea?
- Does the topic sentence capture the main idea, or could I use a more fitting (broader/narrower/more specific) topic sentence?
- Could any of the paragraphs be reordered to improve coherence?
- Is there a logical flow between ideas?

REVERSE OUTLINE TEMPLATE

Thesis:

Paragraph 1

Main idea: _____

Topic sentence: _____

Paragraph 2

Main idea: _____

Topic sentence: _____

Paragraph 3

Main idea: _____

Topic sentence: _____

Paragraph 4

Main idea: _____

Topic sentence: _____

Paragraph 5

Main idea: _____

Topic sentence: _____

Paragraph 6

Main idea: _____

Topic sentence: _____

Your paper may have more paragraphs, so you can add to this template as needed.

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