



University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center

Creating Flow through Reverse Outlining

If your draft feels “choppy,” “all over the place,” or lacking “flow,” try reverse outlining to give you a skeleton view of your draft.

To start, read each paragraph of your draft and ask, “What’s the gist of this paragraph?” Write each gist in a column on a separate sheet of paper. If there’s more than one gist, list them all. Aim to be specific as possible—to show the specific contribution each paragraph is making or might be making in the overall piece.

After you’ve glossed each paragraph, look at the column you’ve created. This is your outline, your skeleton’s view of your draft.

Now, choose among these options to help reduce choppiness or confusion and boost flow:

- Look over this outline and ask, “Which of these gists seem to go together?” “Which set up a contrast?” “What if I tried starting in a different place?” Try two or three other possible orders for your draft.
- Read over your outline and consider what’s not there but could or should be. Jot down a list of what got left out (even things that seem like “tangents”) and then consider where these items might go in your draft.
- Rewrite any paragraphs that have more than one gist to create two (or more) paragraphs, so you have space to develop and illustrate each gist.
- Revisit any paragraph in which a key idea is introduced but largely undeveloped. Rewrite that paragraph to further develop, explore, and illustrate that idea before moving on.
- Rewrite any paragraph whose key gist is buried in the middle of or near the end of the paragraph—to highlight that gist in the very first sentence.
- Also consider a paragraph’s key idea in relation to the paragraph before. Try rewriting the first sentence of a paragraph not only to highlight its key gist but also to show or suggest how it follows from the paragraph before.

Creating Flow:

Sentence-Level Strategies

Worried that your writing is choppy? Want to stay true to the complexities of your subject without leaving readers feeling swamped and confused? Try these tips for sentence-level concision, clarity, and voice from George Copen's and Judith Swan's "The Science of Scientific Writing."

1. Follow the grammatical subject as soon as possible with its verb.

For example, instead of "The MYCN gene, which is a member of the Myc family of oncogenes, plays important roles in cell growth, division, and self-destruction."

a writer could say: "A member of the Myc family of oncogenes, the MYCN gene plays important roles in cell growth, division, and self-destruction."

2. Place the "new information" you want to highlight in the stress position (usually at the end of a sentence) and place "old information" (material already stated in the previous sentence) in the topic position (at the start of the sentence) to clearly show the new sentence's link to the previous sentences *and* to contextualize and spotlight the new information now being introduced.

For example, instead of "Research regarding the benefits of almond yogurt is lacking even though the benefits of almond milk have been documented. Almond yogurt"

a writer could say: "While the benefits of almond milk have been documented, research regarding the benefits of almond yogurt is lacking. Almond yogurt ..."

3. Place the person or thing whose "story" a sentence is telling—the sentence's true subject—at the beginning of the sentence, in the topic position.

For example, instead of "Recently, a subject of interest for scholars studying medieval English politics has been the Magna Carta."

a writer could say: "Recently, the Magna Carta has been a subject of interest for scholars studying medieval English politics."

4. Whenever possible, use specific and active verbs (not "is" or "are") to articulate the action of each sentence.

For example, instead of "The focus of this paper will be the diagnostic criteria of generalized anxiety disorder."

a writer could say: "This paper will focus on the diagnostic criteria of generalized anxiety disorder."