



University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center Big-Picture Revision and Reorganizing

Reverse Outlining

Reverse outlining can help you see the “skeleton” of a piece of writing. By presenting you with an after-the-fact outline of a draft, it can show you what you’ve said where. If you feel your draft is “all over the place,” lacks “flow,” seems “repetitious,” or is “missing something,” give reverse outlining a try.

- Read each paragraph and ask, “What’s the gist?” 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.
- After you’ve glossed each paragraph, look at the column of gists you’ve created. This is your outline, your skeleton’s view of your draft.
- Questions you might ask of your outline include
 - Are my points in a logical order?
 - Why did I arrange things this way?
 - Did I repeat myself?
 - Did I leave anything out?
 - Are all of these parts really relevant? Do they belong in here?
 - Do I need to spend more (or less) time on anything?
 - Am I bringing up topics, moving to other things, then returning to those topics? Is that intentional?
 - Do readers get the information in the order they would need it?
 - How much time did I spend on other people’s ideas vs. my own?

The beauty of the reverse outline is that you can start revising and reorganizing within the outline itself—imagining a different order, adding a new gist to extend an important discussion, making a plan to group, combine, and condense or cut paragraphs that cover similar ground—so that when you return to the longer draft, you know what to tackle and where.

Color Coding

Color coding is an alternative to reverse outlining. Instead of creating an after-the-fact outline, you use color to highlight the aspects of the draft’s structure you’re interested in. For instance:

- To see how much time you spend on summary and how on analysis, choose one color to highlight the first and another to highlight the second.

- To make sure a literature review is organized by theme rather than by article/author, choose a color for each theme or concept.
- If you want to make sure you're leading with, rather than burying or backing into, key ideas in each paragraph, use a highlighter to note where the primary gist is placed in each paragraph.
- If you're worried your tone is too hesitant or strident, use highlighters to see how frequently you "hedge"—qualify or soften—your claims or to identify assertions that may need to be softened.

Once you've completed highlighting, you can look at how the colors are distributed or what the highlights reveal and make decisions about needed reorganization or revising.

Index Cards and Cut-and-Paste

Another alternative to reverse outlining is to use index cards.

- As with reverse outlining, write the gist of each paragraph on an index card. If a paragraph has more than one gist, give each gist its own index card.
- Then lay out your index cards on a table or floor where you can move them about, trying different groupings and arrangements.
- Once you've sorted your index cards into the order you like—adding new index cards for missing material and grouping together index cards covering similar ideas to be combined and condensed—you're ready to return to your draft.

How Would I Teach/Present/Tell Someone About This?

Sometimes the best approach to re-seeing a draft is to set it aside altogether. The below approaches may make it possible for you to return to your draft and the question of organization with fresh eyes:

- Imagine that you are teaching your material to students or that you are giving a conference presentation to people who are interested in but unfamiliar with your *specific* area of research. What would they need to know first? What next? What would you want them to walk away understanding or considering that they had not before? What progression of ideas could get them to such an understanding or realization?
- Try actually telling a friend or family member about your research. Record this conversation, or have someone make notes while you talk, so you can then see where you start, what you include, and in what order you present ideas.