

PURPOSE

Outlines organize the ideas in a paper. Many people think of outlining as a first step in the writing process, but it can also be a productive tool for revision. Reverse outlines are created *after* a draft has been written, allowing you to see if your paper is well organized, where you need more or less information or discussion, and whether your paragraphs “flow.” To create a reverse outline, you will need an extra sheet of paper or a blank document on your computer.

STEPS TO CREATE A REVERSE OUTLINE

1. CHECK YOUR THESIS STATEMENT

If you had to sum up your whole paper in ONE sentence, what would it be? Write this sentence on a separate page.

Ask yourself if this one-sentence summary reflects the claim your thesis statement makes? If the two do not “match,” you can revise your thesis to match your paper more accurately OR you can revise aspects of your paper to match the thesis. Consider which approach will result in a paper that best meets your assignment guidelines.

2. CHECK THE RELEVANCE OF YOUR PARAGRAPHS

Number each paragraph of your essay. On your separate page, write a ONE-sentence/phrase description of each paragraph next to its corresponding number.

Ask yourself if you struggled to describe any paragraphs in just one sentence. If so, the paragraph may include unrelated information. Try dividing it so that each paragraph has one main idea expressed easily in one sentence.

Ask yourself if each paragraph’s brief description clearly relates to the paper’s thesis. If not, you need to take out the paragraph or revise it so the connection to the thesis is clear.

Ask yourself if each paragraph has a topic sentence accurately reflecting its description. If not, revise or add topic sentences that will help readers identify each paragraph’s main idea. If you struggle writing a topic sentence, start with the phrase, “This paragraph is about...,” and then delete this phrase from the resulting sentence as you revise.

3. CHECK THE ORGANIZATION OF YOUR ESSAY

Examine the order of your paragraph descriptions; consider them in relation to each other and to your thesis.

Ask yourself if the current order of the paragraph descriptions makes sense. Do you have paragraphs dealing with similar information scattered throughout the paper? Reordering paragraphs to keep related information together might be more effective.

Ask yourself if there is a better organizational structure for your paper. For example, paragraphs can be arranged according to chronology, problem/corresponding solution, weakest to strongest evidence, or local to global context.

Ask yourself if your paragraph descriptions reveal any gaps or imbalances in information. Have you left out key ideas that would support your thesis? Have you disproportionately discussed some ideas but neglected others (i.e., do 75% of your paragraphs deal with 25% of the information you need to convey)? Does each idea follow logically from the one before it? Do you need to add transitional ideas or phrases to help readers follow your reasoning?

4. CHECK THE ORGANIZATION OF YOUR PARAGRAPHS

Now that you have topic sentences clearly relevant to your thesis and paragraphs ordered appropriately, *go through each paragraph sentence-by-sentence.*

Ask yourself if any sentences just don’t seem to fit. You may need to eliminate or move them or clarify their connection to the topic sentence. *See our MEAL Plan handout for more information on paragraph development.*

EXAMPLE OF A REVERSE OUTLINE

THE PAPER (excerpt)

The Importance of Reason for Steelman and Green Muscle

- ① Our world may often seem to be on the brink of disaster, but at least in the world of comic books, many superheroes exist to protect us. They have different super-powers such as spinning webs, flight, x-ray vision, or super strength. Two of the most famous heroes are also geniuses. Green Muscle is a brilliant physicist, and Steelman is a highly intelligent engineer. These two superheroes may make a great team, but if they were to fight each other who would win? It would be a close match. One is capable of using intellect while fighting crime; the other is controlled by emotions. Steelman is a more effective superhero than Green Muscle because he uses his head instead of his emotions when fighting battles.
- ② Tawny Stork, the wealthy, intelligent engineer behind the steel suit, built his superhero status using his knowledge of technology. Bruce Bunner, the physicist who became Green Muscle, loses his head when he turns into the monstrous superhero. Stork's Steelman suit has amazing powers including the abilities to fly and shoot lasers. Steelman upgrades his powers based on his experiences fighting evildoers, such as when he added mirrors to deflect a villainous light ray. His use of reason enhances his superpowers to make him a formidable opponent.
- ③ All of Bruce Bunner's intelligence ceases to exist when he becomes Green Muscle. When Green Muscle fights villains, the damage he does is accidental. He focuses his rage on whatever is antagonizing him at the time; it does not matter who or what it is.
- ④ While both Stork and Bunner are highly intelligent, one chose the life of a superhero, and the other is a superhero by accident. This difference is important when understanding the behavior the two exhibit both as humans and superheroes. While Bunner never exhibits the rage of Green Muscle, he clearly resents his unintentional superpowers and how they take over his life. This bitterness makes him a far less effective superhero than the committed Stork.
- ⑤ Bruce Bunner had been a mild-mannered physicist until an extraordinary accident in his lab exposed him to powerful chemicals that altered his brain chemistry and nervous system. After months of confusion and unexplained torn clothing and injuries, Bunner realizes that when angered he becomes the destructive superhero known as Green Muscle. He also realizes his emotions – not his intelligence – control these powers.
- ⑥ Steelman never loses the knowledge he gained in life. He is able to reason and outsmart his opponents every time.

THE REVERSE OUTLINE

Paper Summary:

This paper is about why Steelman is a better superhero than Green Muscle.



Thesis:

Stelman is a more effective superhero than Green Muscle because he uses his head instead of his emotions when fighting battles.

[The thesis guides the entire paper; all paragraphs must support this sentence.]

Paragraph Descriptions:

- ① Introduces the two superheroes, their differences, and the questions the thesis addresses.
- ② Background on how Stork becomes Steelman using his intelligence. Also mentions how Bruce Bunner loses his head when becoming Green Muscle.
[This idea doesn't fit the rest of the paragraph but is related to information in paragraph ③.]
- ③ Bruce Bunner cannot use the reason he normally has to control his powers as Green Muscle.
- ④ The difference in how Stork and Bunner became superheroes makes Stork more effective.
- ⑤ Background on how Bunner becomes Green Muscle who is controlled by emotions.
[Stork's background comes in paragraph ②. Shouldn't they be next to each other?]
[Stork's background paragraph includes specific superpowers; background on Bunner should do the same for balance.]
- ⑥ Stork relies on the reason and ingenuity that helped him create Steelman to fight his opponents.
[This seems connected to paragraph ③ – how the heroes' intelligence did or didn't change. Shouldn't the paragraphs be next to each other?]