

Reverse Outline Guidelines

When should I try this?

Reverse outlines can help you move through higher order concerns more efficiently by focusing on a big picture understanding of the paper and prioritizing talking through the draft over reading it aloud. You might suggest a reverse outline to your client if the client brings in a very long paper; has concerns with structure, organization, flow, or transitions; wants to fine tune the thesis statement on their draft; or would like to work on sections in the middle of the end of the paper, and you need a way in.

How do I make a reverse outline with a client?

You should be able to complete this activity without reading your client's draft. Instead, talk through the paper. As your client discusses the idea and purpose of each paragraph, you might to ask him or her to point to *where* these moves are explicitly stated in the writing.

1. Write the client's working thesis at the top of the scrap paper.
2. Talk through the paper paragraph by paragraph: For each body paragraph, ask the client, "What is this paragraph about?" (What is its central claim or idea) **and** "Why does this paragraph matter?" (What is its purpose to the larger argument or structure?)
3. List your client's answers in outline form on your scrap paper.

Example

- I. Intro + Thesis: While G. argues that line always shows hand of artist, I look at style shifts in *Stitches* to suggest additional narrative functions of line use in comics.
- II. Overview of G.'s project & definition of terms (background)
- III. Critique G.'s comparison of line to diction & syntax by bringing in paraphrase (establishes counterargument & helps me define my terms)
- IV. G. argues that line is about the hand (important that I put his argument in terms of narrative theory)

We have a reverse outline! Now what can we do?

- **Tweak the thesis statement:** Remember that the argument developed in the body of the paper is frequently more complex than the argument signaled in the thesis. Does the working thesis still adequately summarize the argument being made? What claims haven't been addressed by the thesis? What claims made in the thesis have been neglected in the body of the paper?
- **Consider reorganizing:** To present this argument clearly and thoroughly to the reader, what might get moved around?
- **Break up long paragraphs:** Locate any paragraphs that take up more than half a page. Is there more than one idea being worked on in this paragraph? Is there a natural break or transition into this second or more detailed thought?
- **Go more deeply into a body paragraph:** Now that you better understand the larger structure of the paper, ask the client if there are particular sections or issues that you can attend to more carefully.
- **Attend to transitions & topic sentences:** Look only at the first sentence of each body paragraph. Does your reverse outline match up with these sentences? Do the topic sentences and transitions clue the reader in on the structure of the paper? How might these be made stronger?