

LUC WRITING CENTER – “HOW TO WRITE A REVERSE OUTLINE”

What is a reverse outline?

A reverse outline is an easy way to check your work after you are done writing. While you may use an outline *before* you write to help organize your ideas, a reverse outline is used *after* you finish your draft to check the organization of your paper and the development of your thesis.

What do reverse outlines do?

1. They help make sure your ideas are clear and organized.
2. They show you if there are any gaps in your argument.
3. They help you check to make sure you fulfilled the paper’s requirements.

How do you make a reverse outline?

You can make a reverse outline in three easy steps:

1. Begin with a finished draft of your paper. If your paper is not finished, you can still create a reverse outline to check your progress.
2. List your thesis at the top of the page.
3. Go through each body paragraph and pull out the main idea(s) and list them in order under your thesis. This can be a numbered or bullet point list. What is important is making sure they are in the same order as your paper. All of your main ideas should develop your thesis.

After you make your reverse outline ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do your main ideas develop your thesis?
2. Do your main ideas flow logically from one another? Is the organization of your ideas coherent?
3. Are any of your ideas repeated?
4. Are there any paragraphs with too many ideas? Are there any paragraphs that do not have one coherent idea?
5. Are there any potential gaps in your ideas or discussion?

For more information and for examples see the following:

[“Reverse Outlining”](#) (Purdue Owl)

[“Reverse Outlines”](#) (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

[“Reverse Outline”](#) (University of North Carolina Chapel Hill)

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*Example of a Reverse Outline*¹

Thesis: Deinstitutionalizing mental patients in the late twentieth-century led to transforming the “hobo” to the “homeless person.”

Paragraph 1: Introduction

Paragraph 2: The image of the hobo before World War II

Paragraph 3: The image of the homeless person today

Paragraph 4: The effects of deinstitutionalization

Paragraph 5: A history of deinstitutionalization

Paragraph 6: A history of the depression; how the depression is both different and similar to the time period of deinstitutionalization; incorrect beliefs about the causes and timeframe of deinstitutionalization

Paragraph 7: The Reagan administration’s policies on deinstitutionalization

Paragraph 8: The realities of life as a “homeless person” contrasted to the romantic notions of “riding the rails.”

Paragraph 9: Conclusion

Looking at the example above, answer the following questions:

- 1. Do the main ideas develop the thesis?** The main ideas seem to be more focused on deinstitutionalization instead of the transformation from “hobo” to “homeless person.”
- 2. Do the main ideas flow logically from one another? Is the organization of the ideas coherent?** The paper starts by talking about the image of the hobo and homeless person but does not come back to them until Paragraph 8, the last body paragraph. The paper also talks about the effects of deinstitutionalization (Paragraph 4) before discussing the history of deinstitutionalization and the depression (Paragraphs 5 and 6). Reorganizing the paragraphs might help make the discussion flow better.
- 3. Are any of the ideas repeated?** No. However, the ideas do seem disorganized.
- 4. Are there any paragraphs with too many ideas? Are there any paragraphs that do not have on coherent idea?** It looks like Paragraph 6 has too many ideas. It might be better to split up the ideas in Paragraph 6 into two different paragraphs to make sure that the discussion is clear and does not overwhelm the reader.
- 5. Are there any potential gaps in the ideas or discussion?** Nothing that a little reorganization will not fix.

¹ (Adapted from Duke University’s [Writing Studio](#))