Reverse Outlines

A reverse outline can be useful when you want to look at the overall flow and structure of your essay, especially if you deviated from your outline... or didn’t make one. It can also help you see where the gaps in your writing are or where your ideas don’t quite come together.

How to use a reverse outline
A reverse outline is most useful when you’ve already written a first or second draft. Reread your draft and make notes in the margins about each paragraph. Write down a short phrase that expresses the main idea of each paragraph or what the paragraph is trying to accomplish. Then, transfer the short phrases to another sheet of paper and make the outline. For example, a reverse outline for a paper on Fahrenheit 451 might look like this:

1. Introduction

2. Basic plot summary
3. Differences between Beatty and Montag
4. Differences between Clarisse and Montag
5. Conclusion

You can make the outline as detailed or as broad as you like; there’s no right or wrong way to format this outline.

After you’ve pulled out the meaning of each paragraph, you can go through and see which areas might need more attention. If you’re worried you strayed from your main idea, find how each paragraph is related to the thesis or the paragraphs surrounding it. Every paragraph should connect back to the thesis in some way; in our example outline, paragraph three discusses the differences between Montag and Beatty, which is connected back to the thesis's argument that the book makes a commentary on human nature in extreme circumstances.

If you’re not sure you answered the prompt, make a check list from your assignment sheet. Can you check off each item? If not, use your check list and your reverse outline to fill in what’s left.
Exercise
What would be good phrases to summarize the following paragraphs? What are their main points? What thesis might they be supporting? You may find it helpful to work with a tutor!

1. To say that Fahrenheit 451 is about Bradbury's views on censorship is stating the obvious. Bradbury lived most of his life in awe of books, and was horrified when he learned of the Nazi book burnings. Indeed, the "Great Purge" of writers, as well as many others who disagreed with Nazi views, left a huge impact on a young Bradbury. Furthermore, Cold War culture also impacts the novel; for example, Beatty's learned hatred for books mimics America turning on its Soviet Allies. Overall, the time Bradbury lived in influenced Fahrenheit 451 more than his views on censorship.

2. Fate is a theme that is found in many of the stories by H.P. Lovecraft. True to form, Lovecraft never uses the star-crossed lover's kind of Fate, but one of impending doom. His characters can often escape their demise by simply running away, but this option either does not occur to the character or is often curtailed by some outside force as in The Colour Out of Space and The Dreams in the Witch House. From his literature, we can see that Lovecraft's view of the fate of mankind is a dismal one.

3. By allowing his protagonist to travel through time in The Time Machine, H.G. Wells is able to project the far reaching consequences of the actions of his contemporary culture to illustrate the virtues of his socialist political views. He creates a world where the human class system has evolved into two races of creatures—the Eoli and the Morlocks. The relationship between these two races serves as a metaphor for the consequences of capitalism.

NOTE: While these paragraphs were written by Writing Center Tutors, the information contained in these paragraphs was taken from Wikipedia pages on their respective subjects and authors.

Contact
Need help thinking in reverse? Want to practice making reverse outlines? Come work with a tutor at the Writing Center! Drop by or use the information below to contact us and set up an appointment.

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