Reverse Outlining

If you’re unsure about the organizational soundness of your writing, reverse outlining can be a very effective way to reorganize and revise. A reverse outline will help you get a clear sense of what you’ve written so far, where your emphasis is, where there might be flow or transition problems, and how well the whole thing fits together.

**Creating a Reverse Outline**

1. Number each paragraph of your draft.
2. In the margins or on another sheet of paper, summarize each paragraph in as few words as possible.
3. Reflect on what you just did.

*Was a particular paragraph difficult to summarize?* It might be lacking in focus or it didn’t make a specific point.

*Did two or more paragraphs say the same thing?* Consider condensing or combining these paragraphs into one strong, focused paragraph.

*Was the summary as long as the paragraph?* It might be trying to cover too much material and would be better broken apart into separate paragraphs.

*Did the paragraph have a clear topic sentence?* Sometimes a buried (or non-existent) topic sentence will make a paragraph difficult to summarize.

1. Group the summaries into blocks.
2. Reflect again.

*Are some summaries out of place? Do the blocks appear in the best order? Do the major blocks correspond with what you consider to be the major sections of your paper?*

1. Mark junctions between blocks and consider what the transition at each spot needs to do.

Between each grouping, there should be some indication of a change in subjects: usually either a paragraph break or a verbal transition. Identify the transition you need and then try to find it in your paper.

1. Mark all the changes you want to make. You’re now ready to revise your work!

Handout adapted from Brock Dethier’s *21 Genres and How to Write Them*, Utah State University Press, 2013.