
Activity: Create a Reverse Outline

Scholarship Skills, Winter 2020

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Let's Blame Mrs. Williams

If you're like most people in our culture, the only formal training you've ever had in planning and organizing proactively was in the fourth or fifth grade. And even if that wasn't the *only* education you've had in this area, it was probably the most emotionally intense (meaning it sank in the deepest).

Mrs Williams, my fourth-grade teacher, had to teach us about organizing our thinking (it was in her lesson plans). We were going to learn to write *reports*. But in order to write a well-organized, successful report, what did we have to write first? That's right —an *outline*.

Did you ever have to do that, create an outline to begin with? Did you ever stare at a Roman numeral I at the top of your page for a torturous period of time and decide that planning and organizing ahead of time were for people very different from you? Probably.

In the end, I did learn to write outlines. I just wrote the report first, and then made up an outline from the report, after the fact.

David Allen, *Getting Things Done*
Penguin, 2002

As a means of organizing a writing project, outlines are overrated. If they work for you, that's great—keep on using them. But if they don't work for you, *don't panic!* Many successful writers don't use them. Instead, they *write their way* into a project.

The reason that outlines rarely work is the same reason that up-front software design rarely works: when you start a writing project, you don't yet know enough about the subject to anticipate every piece of background that you will need or every argument that you will have to make or refute. As you write, you come up with questions that you can't answer, which prompt you to do more literature research, or perhaps conduct another experiment. Your ideas change and clarify: now you can write more, and the cycle repeats. It's hardly surprising that, even if you did start with an outline, your first draft doesn't look much like it.

This doesn't mean that outlines are useless: far from it. Outlines are a great tool for *revising* what you have written. They can help you to remove extraneous material, re-organize to help the

reader, to keep sections and paragraphs on topic, and find places where you need to add a transition. Working in this way—*from* the first draft *to* the outline—is called **reverse outlining**.

Now that you know the term *reverse outline*, you will be able to find a wealth of “how to do it” information on the web. I found these resources helpful:

1. [Creating a Reverse Outline from a Written Draft](#), Northcentral University Writing Center,
2. [Reverse Outlining: An Exercise for Taking Notes and Revising Your Work](#), Purdue University Online Writing Lab, and
3. [The after-the-fact outline](#), Text and Academic Authors Association Blog.

As with most re-writing and revising, it’s easier to learn the technique on someone else’s paper: having labored long over our own paper, we get attached to our own prose, and are reluctant to delete or rearrange large chunks of it. So, for this exercise, we are asking you to create a reverse outline from a peer’s draft paper.

WHAT YOU SHOULD DO

1. Create a reverse-outline from your peer’s draft manuscript. Try one of the techniques described in the above resources, or a combination of them. Your outline can take the form of marginal notes, or a separate document.
2. Summarize what you learned from the outline as a set of **recommendations to the author** on how to improve the paper.
3. If you notice technical problems with the draft that you are outlining, feel free to bring them to the author’s attention (probably by marking-up the draft manuscript). However, doing so is not a requirement for this exercise.
4. When you have finished your outline, return it to the author of the draft. If you don’t finish in class, please try to complete your outline before the end of the day. The author is working to a deadline!