Reverse Outline

A reverse outline, sometimes called an ATF (after-the-fact) outline, provides a shorthand version of an essay's organization. It also shapes the content of an essay by highlighting where writers' ideas may be underdeveloped or logically inconsistent.

Problems With Outlines

We're all familiar with the outlining process, which asks writers to predetermine an essay's organization by plotting its trajectory in advance. While this process can be useful, students may struggle to determine what elements to include before they've had a chance to "think while writing."

Once they have a formalized outline – particularly if you require it as a stand-alone entity – they often cannot find a place for their more advanced thinking. And so they stick with the predetermined outline even as their ideas have evolved.

I don't dismiss prewriting outlines altogether, but I try to leave room for them to grow. If students find that ordering their ideas before freewriting is useful, they should do it. But they should also retain the possibility that those ideas will change and, as they write the first draft, they should revisit and adjust the outline to reflect their improved thinking.

How It Works

A reverse outline helps students see what they have already written rather than what they will write.

They should jot a few words in the margin of each paragraph describing what the paragraph is doing or saying. In this case, what the paragraph **does** means what it contributes to the argument ("Restatement and explanation of thesis," "presentation of opposing arguments") while what the paragraph **says** refers to its specific content ("How adolescents respond to prefrontal cortex stimulation – overview of the field," "why this matters for brain development"). The notes are meant only for the student herself, so they need not be well written. They should simply describe the work of each paragraph.

After writing their notations, students should copy each notation in list form on a single page. This is their reverse outline, a document that plots not what they *will do* in their essay but what they *have already done*. They can then evaluate the logic of the essay.

Why It Works

Once the notations are organized into a single list, students will notice fixable issues:

1. Some paragraphs include multiple elements. Separating those into independent paragraphs – or, if the same information exists elsewhere, combining the errant information with a paragraph where it appears in more depth – eliminates intra-paragraph disorganization.
2. The same notation for multiple paragraphs likely means students are repeating themselves. They can rearrange, combine, and delete to eliminate repetition.
3. Illogically ordered ideas will stand out on the reverse outline and can then be rearranged.
4. Students may notice that they have omitted an idea they'd planned to include.