**Reverse Outlines**

By Rachael Cayley Posted on February 9, 2011

My favorite revision strategy is the reverse outline. Simply stated, a reverse outline is an outline that we create from an existing text; rather than turning an outline into a text, we are turning a text into an outline. A reverse outline will reveal the structure—and thus the structural problems—of a text.

The reverse outline is an effective strategy because it can create an objective distance between you and your text. It gives us a way into a text that might otherwise resist our editorial efforts. We often find our early drafts disconcerting: we know they are flawed, but changing them can still seem risky. A reverse outline can give us purpose and direction as we undertake the valuable project of restructuring our written work.

**Creating Reverse Outline**

Step 1: Number the paragraphs

The basic unit of a reverse outline is the paragraph, so the first step is to number the paragraphs. While writers naturally focus on sentences, we must always remember that our readers are naturally inclined to focus on paragraphs. Note whether you have a sufficient number to fully express your argument, or whether you’ll need to add/subtract for clarity.

Step 2: Identify the topic of each paragraph

Once the paragraphs have been numbered, try to identify a topic in each one (**still working on the original draft**). This process will be challenging: not all paragraphs will have topics and not all topics will be expressed neatly in a single paragraph. When doing a reverse outline, it is crucial to remember that you are trying to make evident what is there rather than what ought to be there. In other words, **this step is diagnostic**. You are simply noting what each paragraph was trying to do, for better or worse. Once you’ve done that, you can observe whether topic sentences can be found and make a note of paragraph length. Does the paragraph have a topic sentence? Yes or no? And how long is the paragraph? The latter can be recorded in more qualitative terms as short, average, or long. You should be doing all of this in a brightly-colored pen directly onto your first draft.

Step 3: Arrange these topics into an outline

To create this first outline, you are doing nothing more than listing the topics that you’ve identified: bullet points per paragraph. The crucial thing at this stage is to leave your original text alone and work just on the outline; you are trying to keep yourself away from the muddling effect of the detailed content in your own writing. You are trying to see past the detail and look just at essential **structure**.

Step 4: Analyze this outline

The next step is to analyze this outline, paying particular attention to the logic and proportionality of your internal organization. Understanding these elements involves observing the way elements have been placed **in relation** to one another and how much space is being devoted to each element. **This step is the bridge between noting what you have and preparing to create something new.**

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**New Outline**

Step 5: Create a revised outline

During steps 3 and 4, you’ve been working with a list of topics; **in step 5, you will have to transform that list into a genuine outline. Now that you can see all the topics and can start to see possible weaknesses in either your ordering of points or your allocation of space, you are ready to create a better outline for the text.** You have the best of both worlds at this point: you know a great deal that you didn’t know before you started writing, but you are still working at a level of abstraction that will keep you from getting bogged down in the details.

**Actual Revision of the Paper**

Step 6: Reorganize the text according to the revised outline

Here comes the hard part. In steps 3, 4, and 5, you’ve been working with the outline. Now it’s time to use this new outline to transform the text. This step is certainly intimidating. That initial draft—even with all the flaws that you’ve just uncovered—will generally have a real hold on you. That hold comes from the legitimate fear that you might take away existing coherence and flow without being able to replace it with something better. **At this point, you need confidence: confidence in the new outline and confidence in your ability to transform your text into something better.** The time for massaging everything into a cohesive whole will come, but for now you must trust that the new outline has allowed you to devise a new and improved configuration of your text.

Step 7: Check for topic sentences and cohesion for your new essay

The final step is to pay attention to the way your new paragraphs work. The new and improved configuration will be, needless to say, both better and worse. It will be better because it will reflect your careful and clearheaded analysis of what it needs to do; it will be worse because it will still require a lot of new work. **To get a head start on the next stages of revision, you can identify whether you have topic sentences early in your paragraphs and whether those paragraphs use their length effectively to develop clear topics.** While there will still be lots of work to do, you can turn to that work secure in the knowledge that you have created an effective structure for this text. Polishing a text is time-consuming work, but it is easier and more efficient when you are working on a text that you know to be well-organized and well-proportioned.