A reverse outline is a way to make sense of the structure of your essay draft by summarising paragraphs into phrases. Sometimes we make an outline and then by the time we finish our first draft, we haven’t stayed with our intended structure. Even in later drafts of our work, we can lose the thread of our thoughts. We are too close to the text, in this case, missing the forest for the trees. One way to get an understanding of how the ideas are progressing and where to make structural changes is to do a reverse outline. It will help to see the development of ideas from a more distant view.

How to do it

Either in print or on the screen, read through each paragraph and in the left margin summarise the main point in a single word or phrase. Let’s say you are writing a paper on Shakespeare, your first paragraph might be summarised as introduction, the next might be author background, then text background, then Ophelia overview, etc. This process essentially reverse engineers an outline from where you are at that point in the writing.

Troubleshooting

If you are unable to summarise the paragraph in a clear statement, then it could be one of two reasons:

1. **You don’t have a central point to your paragraph.** If so, try to include a topic sentence at the top of the paragraph that explicitly links the evidence to the previous point or the main thesis.
2. **You have more than one central point to the paragraph.** If this is the case, think about breaking up the ideas into their own paragraphs in order to clarify your points.

How to use it

Once you have the paragraphs summarised into central points, you can compare your reverse outline to the original outline and see how your work is progressing. Or, you can move forward from where you are in the essay by using the reverse outline to decide the best next step. Hopefully, you will be able to see the way the essay’s arguments and evidence are progressing towards explaining and defending the main point.