

Reverse Outlining

What is reverse outlining?

Reverse outlining is when you create an outline of an essay *after* it has been written and find the main ideas in each paragraph. An outline is a writing tool to help you structure and plan your essay, and it creates a guide for how to organize your paragraphs. A reverse outline is a good tool to help you check the organization, logical sequence, and content relevance of your paper. By extracting the main ideas from each section of your paper, you can see the structure of the paper and the sequence of your ideas and paragraphs. Looking at the ideas you pulled from your paper can also help you check whether or not the paragraph or information is relevant to the thesis.

How do I create a reverse outline?

Sometimes it helps to visualize the reverse outlining process if you print out the paper and write in the margins next to each paragraph. Otherwise, you can open a new document or find a piece of paper and write the outline with bullet points, numbers, or letters.

Step One: Find your thesis

Find your thesis and remind yourself of the topic, claim, and main points. Your thesis is the guide to your outline, and you will be using it to assess if the information is relevant and to check the logical sequence of your paper. Keep in mind that your thesis is not set in stone yet, and you might find through the reverse outlining process that there is a better way to phrase it.

Thesis: The Americanization Movement and World War I revolutionized adult ESL education in the United States.

Step Two: Find the main idea of each paragraph

Read the body paragraphs and summarize each in your own words as if you were explaining it to a friend. Then, with this main idea in mind, check your topic sentence to make sure that it reflects the rest of the paragraph. After comparing your topic sentence and your summary, decide if you would like to adjust anything. You can change the topic sentence to introduce all your supporting information, or you can cut and/or reorganize the body paragraph to fit the topic sentence. Make sure your topic sentence prepares the reader for what information they will read in that paragraph and take out any irrelevant sentences.

Body Paragraph 1: Between 1880 and 1924, over 20 million immigrants arrived in the United States and many of them found jobs in factories and mines. Unlike the wave of immigration earlier in the 1800s, many of these new workers were from Eastern and Southern Europe and very few knew English. The influx	Main idea (for your outline): Over 20 million immigrants came to the United States between 1880 and 1924, and the Americanization Movement was born in the early 1900s to
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<p>of non-English speakers drove the U.S. government, factory owners, and Progressive reformers to unite and create adult English as a second language (ESL) education and assimilation programs. When World War I broke out, these Americanization programs also wanted to instill patriotism and teach “American” customs so that immigrants would be loyal to the United States.</p>	<p>teach them American customs, patriotism, and English.</p>
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Step Three: Assess the relevance to your thesis

Now, once your reverse outline is done, take either your notes in the margins or your bullet-point outline and examine whether the main ideas you extracted from each paragraph relate to the thesis. Is each paragraph relevant to your topic? Does the reader need to know the information presented? Why or why not? If you find that the paragraph is off topic, you can delete it completely or pick and choose sentences that *are* relevant and place them in other body paragraphs where they fit.

Step Four: Examine the sequence of ideas and organization

If your thesis has an obvious sequence to its construction, make sure that the structure of the outline reflects the order given in your introduction. Remember that your thesis statement is the road map and guide for your reader, so having the sequences be parallel is important. However, don't be afraid to change your thesis if you prefer the order of your paragraphs. If you are writing a research paper that requires paragraphs discussing methods, data, results, etc., check to see if you have all those sections in order.

Optional Step Five: Add or subtract information

Now, your reverse outline and following analysis are complete, and through this process maybe you've moved things around, so it's time to see if you need to add or subtract any content. Maybe you noticed that you need a transition paragraph to smooth the flow in your 12-page paper, or maybe you realized you'd forgotten to add the section on data collection. If applicable, watch out for harsh jumps between topics, and make sure you have transitions between paragraphs linking your main points. With the outline structure in front of you, you can make sure you like the flow and organization and check that everything ties together and relates to your thesis.

Example of a Reverse Outline

Thesis:

The Americanization Movement and World War I revolutionized adult ESL education in the United States.

Body Paragraph 1:

Over 20 million immigrants came to the United States between 1880 and 1924, and the Americanization Movement was born in the early 1900s to teach them American customs, patriotism, and English.

Body Paragraph 2:

Since many immigrants came from the European countries fighting in World War I, the United States government supported adult ESL education to prevent disloyalty and promote citizenship.

Body Paragraph 3:

World War I in the United States was a time of intense nationalism, strict censorship, and anti-immigrant sentiments, so many immigrants felt pressured to prove their patriotism and learn English.

Body paragraph 4:

Many immigrants and their children joined the U.S. military during World War I, so many of them learned English with the help of their fellow soldiers.

Body paragraph 5:

Even before the United States entered World War I, American factory production increased, but many of the immigrant workers did not know English, causing factory owners to support ESL education so that manufacturing could be more efficient.

Body paragraph 6:

As well, labor unions wanted immigrant factory workers to learn English so they could join their activism for better working conditions.

Conclusion:

Even though the Americanization Movement began before 1914, the paranoia, patriotism, and labor union activism caused by World War I drove many immigrants to learn English from textbooks and programs that had been adjusted to meet the needs of an adult ESL learner.

Activity

One of the purposes of writing a reverse outline is to check the logical and thematic flow of your paper. For this activity, look at the example of a reverse outline below. How would you revise it? First, identify the thesis. Second, delete ideas that seem unnecessary. Third, rearrange the outline so that the order of ideas makes sense. Lastly, make sure that the paragraphs relate to the thesis and that the revised order conveys your ideas in an orderly and concise manner.

1. The 14th century plague known as the Black Death drastically changed Europe's socio-economic system after the disease killed between a quarter to a third of the population.
2. The Black Death, or Bubonic Plague, traveled to Europe on ships and spread through the fleas that jumped off infected rats.
3. With the loss of skilled workers and artisans, guilds started to accept people who had originally been refused entry, and thus, there were more opportunities for upward social mobility.
4. When landowners died, there was a surplus of land that lowered property prices, and with fewer workers, they could demand higher wages.
5. Since nest fleas do not travel on humans, it was fur fleas that spread the Black Death because they had adapted to staying on the backs of animals.
6. When grain prices rose due to lack of demand, it dropped even further when farmers planted more grain, pushing manorial lords into debt and giving peasants more bargaining power.
7. With the dramatic loss of population, the Black Death disrupted the familiar patterns of supply and demand, providing peasants with opportunities for increased income and social mobility, thus shaking up the socio-economic dynamic of Europe.

Thesis: _____

Revised order of paragraphs: _____

Answer Key for Activity

1. Thesis: The 14th century plague known as the Black Death drastically changed Europe's socio-economic system after the disease killed between a quarter to a third of the population.
2. Delete: 5.
3. Revised: 1, 2, (4, 6, 3), 7 or 1, 2, (3, 4, 6), 7.

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