

# NCU Writing Center

This material was originally posted by the Writing Center at NorthCentral University, at [http://learners.ncu.edu/writingprogram/writing\\_center.aspx?menu\\_id=124](http://learners.ncu.edu/writingprogram/writing_center.aspx?menu_id=124). I can no longer find it on the internet, other than in the internet archive. So I'm reproducing the text here.

## Creating a Reverse Outline from a Written Draft

Early in the academic writing process, many writers prefer to create an outline for a paper that details the thesis statement, the topic sentences and supporting ideas to be provided in each of the body paragraphs, and the final points to be made in the conclusion (see [What Works Best: Outlining or Writing?](#)). The Reverse Outline, however, is created *after* the first draft has been written.

Rather than reporting what the writer intended to say, a Reverse Outline reports exactly what has been written throughout the entire paper. In this way, a Reverse Outline is a much more honest and objective way for the writer to determine what the draft is actually saying as a written text. Despite a writer's planned intentions before the first draft, all writers should acknowledge that writing the first draft and employing sources will often lead to unplanned changes and different directions than those intended before any writing began. Therefore, a Reverse Outline is important to determine what is being said, how the evidence and support have changed the shape and vision of the argument, how the writer may improve the new direction and organization of the paper, and how the thesis may be revised for accuracy.

### How to create a Reverse Outline:

1. Print a clean copy of the paper.
2. Go through the paper and number each paragraph.
3. On a separate sheet of paper, write #1 and the main idea and supporting points of that first paragraph. (Alternately, the main idea and supporting points may also be written into the margins of the paper while reading. This will help the writer to verify that the MEAL Plan – Main idea, Evidence, Analysis, and Link – is intact for each paragraph. For more on the MEAL Plan formula, please see [Crafting the Evidence, Analysis, and Transition for Each Paragraph](#).)
4. Continue this process through the second paragraph and all remaining paragraphs in the paper.

## How to use a Reverse Outline:

When every paragraph is outlined, the writer should carefully review the Reverse Outline to determine

- if the paper is on topic
- if the purpose and thesis are clear
- if each body paragraph is coherent and focused on one main idea (MEAL Plan)
- if the organization of the body paragraphs/supporting ideas are in the best or most effective order
- if the thesis needs to be revised to better reflect the actual content of the supporting topics and relevant evidence as they are developed throughout the body paragraphs

Also, to verify the [MEAL Plan](#) is intact for each paragraph, the writer should carefully review to determine

- if the topic sentence in each paragraph accurately states that paragraph's main idea
- if each topic sentence places direct emphasis on the thesis statement for the entire text
- if each claim or supporting idea is coherent and supported with evidence or relevant details
- if each claim or supporting idea is unnecessarily repeated, requires more development and connection with other supporting points, or needs to be developed in a new paragraph
- if the evidence and support are relevant to each topic sentence and the thesis
- if any supporting ideas need to be cut from the paper, or if any new supporting ideas need to be added to the paper

Remember: writing the first draft and employing sources will often lead to unplanned changes and different directions than those intended before writing began. Therefore, the Reverse Outline is a great strategy to help the writer get back on track and refocus the main idea. Creating a Reverse Outline after each draft is highly recommended to keep track of all changes in content and organization.

For more information about Reverse Outlines, please see the Writing Centers at [Colorado](#), [Purdue](#), and [Chapel Hill](#).