

**THE CENTER FOR THEOLOGICAL WRITING
DUKE DIVINITY SCHOOL**

REVERSE OUTLINING

Reverse outlining is a technique that can help you improve the organization and clarity of your paper.

Once you have a complete draft:

1. Write a sentence summarizing each of your paragraphs.
2. If you have difficulty coming up with a summary statement, this may be a sign that your paragraph lacks a clear focus and there are too many ideas present. You probably need to delete material or divide the paragraph into smaller ones. Revise it and try again to write a summary statement.
3. Ask yourself if the first sentence of each paragraph is similar to your summary statement. If not, yet again, consider revising. Readers should be able to read the beginning of each paragraph and know where they are headed.
4. Now look at the list of your summary statements. Does each statement play a role in supporting your thesis? If not, consider revising, moving, or deleting paragraphs in your paper so that they contribute to your argument.
 - a. Revising. Sometimes a paragraph will contain all that you want to say, but the points are not structured sufficiently clearly to communicate well. Think about what is most important, what you want to emphasize to the reader, and make all that you have to say serve that goal.
 - b. Moving. Your reverse outline should clearly map your topics. Let's say you are writing a paper on an author and intertextuality. You have looked at Old and New Testament references used by the author, but unfortunately your paragraphs jump randomly between Old and New Testament material. Cluster like paragraphs with like.
 - c. Deleting. For many writers, deleting what might very well be interesting material is hard to do. However, if the material is not directly relevant to your topic and thesis, get rid of it. You can always put it in a separate file for possible use at a later date.
5. Take another look at your summary statements and ask if they truly support your thesis. Sometimes rewriting and rearranging your material is not sufficient to produce a coherent paper. You may need to revise your thesis.