Backwards Outlining:
Tools for Editing a Rough Draft

What is backwards outlining? Why do it?

A backwards outline is an outline you write up by actually reading through a rough draft of your essay and reviewing what you've already written, by writing down the main point of each paragraph. (Some people also call it a reverse outline or skeletal outline, because it shows you the bare bones ideas of your essay, so that you can work on fleshing them out during the revision process.)

Just as creating an outline *before* beginning a draft can be a helpful tool for getting started, backwards outlining *after* you've written a draft can be a helpful tool for continuing to write. It allows you to see where your paper stands and how your ideas come across so far, and also gives you direction for editing and expanding an existing draft.

What are some questions to think about and address during the process of backwards outlining?

- Does the organization support a developing argument? How does the thesis evolve, or continue to develop, as each new paragraph is introduced?

- Does each paragraph move the main argument forward? (*You could test this by articulating the relationship between a paragraph and the main argument for each questionable paragraph*.)

- What material should be moved?

- What material seems redundant or extraneous?

- Are there gaps in your argument?

- Are the terms of each paragraph consistent? If not, what differences need further explanation?

What are some additional techniques for backwards outlining?

After filling out a chart, or creating a numbered outline of the main points in your essay, you could try one of the following (or a combination of them, depending on your writing needs at a given stage of drafting):

- Review the main points of each paragraph and return to your **thesis**. Does it lay a solid foundation for what's to come? Does it do justice to the main ideas you present in the paper? Does it get at a significance-level claim (i.e. a "so what?")? You can even read your thesis aloud. Then, make changes to your thesis in order to better address these questions.

- Consider your **topic sentences**, i.e. the first sentence of each paragraph. Does it orient readers effectively to understand the main point of the paragraph? Does it make an argumentative or significance-level claim, rather than merely summarize or make an observation? In other words, does it get at some kind of "so what"? All of the topic sentences collectively should indicate the flow of your paper; in other words, they should provide a road map of your paper. **Go through your paper reading only the first sentences of each paragraph and ignoring everything else.** You may want to print out the document and highlight all these sentences. Make notes of any problems with the flow and adjust wording and/or organization accordingly. Note that this technique is good both for checking the structure of your paper and for checking the strength of your topic sentences.

- Consider your **transitions *between* paragraphs, from the last sentence of one paragraph to the first sentence of the next**. If you have done a good job of arranging paragraphs so that the content of one leads logically to the next, the transition will highlight a relationship that already exists between the two paragraphs. A transition between paragraphs can be a word or two (*however, for example, similarly*, etc.), a phrase, or a sentence. **Go through your paper reading every such sentence pair, and make sure that each of these transitions makes sense.** Reading through the paper and focusing only on this particular type of transition often makes transition problems stand out much more than if you were reading entire paragraphs. You can make use of some of these **useful transitional expressions:**
    - *To compare:* also, in the same way, likewise, similarly, just as… so…
    - *To contrast/make an exception*: although, and yet, but, despite, even so, even though, however, in contrast, in contrast, in spite of, nevertheless, on the contrary, on the other hand, still, yet, unlike
    - *To show cause and effect*: accordingly, as a result, because, consequently, hence, otherwise, since, then, therefore, thus