

Writing Process: Reverse Outlining

Outlining is an activity usually associated with pre-writing—it's something we do before we draft our paper. Reverse outlining, in contrast, is done after a paper is written. It's a useful strategy for improving the organization of your paper, including paragraph structure—especially if you think your paper might lack “flow” and focus.

To make your reverse outline, we suggest working off of a printed copy of your paper. This will allow you to better see the relationship among your paragraphs.

Step 1

As you read through your essay, write the main point of each paragraph in the margin next to the paragraph or on a separate sheet. When you've completed writing these points, you've essentially created an outline of your current draft. If you find it difficult to summarize a paragraph into a single phrase or sentence, then you'll probably want to divide it into two or more paragraphs that are each focused on a single subtopic.

Step 2

Now read your outline (see below for an example). Ask yourself, does each paragraph's main point support my thesis? Omit paragraphs that contain unnecessary information. Also, does each paragraph logically follow from the other, or are your ideas scattered? Move paragraphs so that they form a cohesive narrative.

Reverse Outline

- I. Introduction
- II. STBS are increasing worldwide
- III. STBs are increasing among teens
- IV. Effects of STBs on body image
- V. STBs may increase anxiety and depression
- VI. Types of screens
- VII. STBs correspond with increase in sedentary behavior
- VIII. STBs, sedentary behavior, and body image
- IX. Types of entertainment
- X. STBs and violent behavior
- XI. Possible benefits of STBs
- XII. Conclusion

In the reverse outline, several paragraphs are out of place—a paragraph on types of screens is between two paragraphs about negative effects of STBs, and body image is addressed twice but in paragraphs that are far away from each other. These paragraphs should be moved and/or combined.

Revised Outline

- I. Introduction
- II. STBS are increasing worldwide
- III. STBs are increasing among teens
- IV. Most popular screen types and entertainment
- V. STBs correspond with increase in sedentary behavior
- VI. Effects of STBs on body image
- VII. STBs may increase anxiety and depression
- VIII. STBs and violent behavior
- IX. Possible benefits of STBs
- X. Conclusion

In revising the outline, this writer shifted several paragraphs so that the content is presented in a more logical order: increase in STBs, types of STBs, negative effects of STBs, and finally, possible benefits of STBs. There are fewer paragraphs, but each paragraph is better organized and flows more logically from the previous one.