

## Reverse Outlining as a Revision Tool

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### 1 What is reverse outlining, and why should you do it?

Reverse outlining is a part of the revision process that many students and working philosophers have found very helpful. As with all remarks about the writing process, I give these remarks fully cognizant of the fact that many people have different working processes and styles, so this may, in the end, not work for you. But I strongly encourage you to try it a few times so that you can see if it works for you, and do give it more than one try.

If you've looked at the *Dimensions of Excellence* handout, you've seen that some of the features that contribute to the success of a philosophy paper are broadly "holistic"—they concern how different parts of the paper fit together. Does everything in the paper support the thesis? Can the reader tell what job each paragraph does? Do you explain all of the critical notions that you use throughout the paper? Do you explain them before you use them? These features include a lot of what often goes under the heading of "being well-structured."

Many writing resources suggest that you produce an outline before you write, but for many people writing philosophy papers, that's not workable. Philosophy is hard, and it lives in the details, and how to structure the paper, what argumentative strategy to pursue, will depend on these details. But many of us cannot figure out the details before we sit down and do a lot of writing. So it's not helpful to write a very detailed outline. And even if you do write an outline, chances are very good that your thinking will develop beyond the outline as you actually write your paper.

The result is that the first few drafts of your paper will still be unstable. By the time you've reached the end of the draft, just what it is you want to argue may have shifted as you've come to see both strengths and weaknesses that were hidden from view before you began. The argument you set out to write may not have survived your critical scrutiny. And if that happens, chunks of your exposition may not be relevant to the argument you finally ended up with. What's more, though you have the new conclusion, and the argument for it in your head, what's on the page no longer matches your level of thinking of understanding. The paper will, in other words, be more like a record of the progress of your thinking and less like a statement of an argument.

For most of us, this is something that happens not just in the first or second draft, but in the third, fourth, or fifth. So don't be too eager to complete this reverse-outline step. When it feels to you as if your thinking is fairly stable, then you should try it. Your judgment as to the right moment to try this will develop as you gain more experience writing philosophy.

Here, then, is the *why* of reverse-outlining: it allows you to take stock of the pieces in your paper right now and gain an overview that makes it easier to evaluate how your paper does on the holistic dimensions of excellence.

## 2 The Process

- (1) Number your paragraphs.
- (2) On a separate sheet of paper, write down the main point each paragraph makes in a single sentence.
- (3) On another piece of paper, write down your main argument in as short and precise a form as possible. If you have experience writing paragraphs down as numbered premises and conclusions, do that.
  - a. To write down your argument, draw on the points you identified in step (2), as well as your feel for logic.
  - b. This is just your main argument for your thesis — if you wrote it down as a formally valid argument, chances are even that you won't explicitly mention all of the premises you came up with.
- (4) Using the argument you created in step (3), create an outline of the paper.
  - a. Make a decision about which other texts to discuss, and why. Do they introduce your thesis, or show that it's interesting? If the thesis is a critique of someone else, then that's easy. If your thesis is a positive proposal to something, does the discussion of other authors show failed proposals in the same area? Something that you want to build on? Something that supports a key premise of yours?
  - b. Make a decision about which of your premises is most interesting and most controversial. That should get the most space in your paper.
  - c. Make a decision about whether to entertain objections, and if so, which ones.
- (5) As you produce this new outline of your paper, go through the list of points you made in step (1) and insert them into appropriate spots in the new outline. Cross them off as you go along.
- (6) Once you're done with the new outline, go back to your list of points from step (1). If there are any left over, ask yourself whether the points in there are still relevant to your paper as you now conceive of it. If so, figure out where to put them. If not, delete them.
  - a. Putting in relevant points that you hadn't so far may well require making some changes in the new outline.
- (7) Go through your new outline and take note of where you first make use of special terminology.
  - a. Make sure that the terminology is consistent.
  - b. Make sure that you explain the terminology at an appropriate place. Often, that's when you first use it; but sometimes, especially early in the paper, it's important to give the reader a sense of where you're going, and it's better to say that you'll explain some key idea, notion, or expression later.