Reverse Outline

Objective: Similar to the way that a Rough Plan helps you to identify what you intended to do in your paper, a reverse outline guides you through, paragraph by paragraph, to identify what you are actually doing in your paper.

Directions:

→ Go through and number each of your body paragraphs.

→ Read through the first paragraph and identify what that paragraph is doing. Is it introducing an idea? Is it providing background information? Is it providing an example? Offering a counterargument? Something else entirely? Keep in mind that you aren’t considering what you intended the paragraph to do. For the reverse outline, you are concerned only with what is actually on the page.

→ In the margins or on a separate piece of paper, describe what the first body paragraph is doing. If the paragraph is doing more than one thing, write them all down.

→ Move on to the next paragraph, repeating this same process for the entire paper. Don’t stop until you have a record of what each and every paragraph is doing.

Once You Have Identified What Each Paragraph Is Doing:

Now that you have a written record of what each paragraph is doing, try to locate and write down any places where you are:

1) Being unnecessarily repetitive by raising the same idea or point several times within different paragraphs

2) Failing to connect the paragraph to your main argument

3) Jumping from idea to idea without providing sufficient transitions

4) Introducing ideas and arguments that you don’t develop fully

Once you’ve determined if you are making some of these problematic moves, you’ll have a better sense of where you might want to revise in terms of structure.