A reverse outline is a map of a paper-in-process made by labeling/summarizing each paragraph into a single sentence. When you are writing, you are necessarily zooming in to work with details—sentences, words, and punctuation. It is easy to lose sight of the argument as a whole. A reverse outline enables you to zoom out, like a painter stepping back from a large canvas to see the big picture.

How to create a reverse outline:
1. Number each paragraph in your draft.
2. On a separate sheet, write the numbers in a column on the left side of the paper. Write your thesis or major claim at the top of the page.
3. For each paragraph in your draft, ask “what is this paragraph about?” or “what point is this paragraph making?” and write the answer beside the number on the separate sheet.
4. When you’ve done, you have an outline of the paper.

Why is this useful?
1. Process tells you if your paragraphs are unified and developed.
   a. If you have trouble summarizing a paragraph in one sentence or less, you probably have too many ideas in the paragraph. Break it up into two or three paragraphs, or get rid of the extraneous material.
   b. If your summary is the same length as the paragraph, the paragraph is probably underdeveloped. Either develop the ideas further or consider whether it is part of an earlier or later paragraph.
   c. If you can take a sentence from the paragraph to put into your outline, you are making excellent use of topic sentences, and your writing is probably already clear.
   d. Look at your summaries. Would it make your paper clearer if the summary was at the beginning of the paragraph? i.e., use the summaries to create topic sentences
2. An outline is a summary of your argument, which you can use to analyze, develop, and if necessary, improve your argument.
   a. Does each paragraph support or relate clearly to your thesis or main claim?
   b. Read your outline out loud. Does each paragraph follow logically or does it seem very choppy or jumpy?
   c. Look for repetition or paragraphs that seem every similar. Maybe they should be combined?
   d. Do any paragraphs seem unrelated to the rest? Reconsider why they are there.
   e. Are there gaps in the argument? Key words in the claim that don’t appear in the outline? Maybe you need to add more ideas—or revise your claim.

Q: When should I make a reverse outline?
A: Whenever you need one. When you are stuck in the details. When you have lost the thread of your argument.
Reverse Outline Worksheet

My working thesis or claim is:

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.
11.
12.

Some additional tips:
- If your paper has subheadings, include them in your reverse outline
- You can do a partial reverse outline for one or two sections of your paper or argument—you don’t always need to outline the whole paper
- You can make a reverse outline on your word processor using headings and then the outline function, but working on paper makes it more likely that you will summarize the whole paragraph, not just a part of it
- If you need to write an abstract, your reverse outline is an excellent place to start

Notes on diagnosis

Created by Sarah King, The Writing Centre, University of Toronto Scarborough. Use with acknowledgment.

Handout also available at http://ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/twc/webresources.