

Descriptive / Reverse / After-the-Fact Outlines

What is a descriptive outline?

Writers sometimes choose to write a regular outline *before* they start drafting paper, but writers don't always stick to their original plan. **A descriptive outline is something a writer writes after developing a draft.** Descriptive outlines help writers to think about what they've actually written.

Why should I make a descriptive outline?

- **To see the big picture of your paper** in order to revise for big picture issues: the arrangement and trajectory of your argument.
- **To consider the main ideas that “label” your paragraphs** and determine whether they're appropriate. You may determine that you need to rewrite the topic sentences that contain your main ideas or break paragraphs that contain too many ideas.

How do I make a descriptive outline?

Your goal is to make a readable overview of your argument. In the margins of your paper, number the paper's paragraphs. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, write the number of each paragraph. Then write the main point or points that you make in each paragraph.

How do I use my descriptive outline to help me revise?

Look carefully at your overview and ask yourself questions about your topic sentences, the scope of the argument, and the arrangement and trajectory of your argument.

- **Questions about topic sentences:**
 - Are the paragraphs properly focused, or are there multiple main ideas competing for control of a single paragraph?
 - Should I break up paragraphs with multiple main ideas or should I write a topic sentence that reflects the multiple points I address?
- **Questions about arrangement and trajectory:**
 - Should I move any paragraphs to improve the arc of my argument?
 - Does the organization of the paper reflect what I promised in my introduction / thesis?
 - Should I restructure the paper in some way to make it reflect what I promise in my intro?
 - Or should I rewrite the introduction to reflect what I've done in the paper?
- **Questions about the argument's scope:**
 - Are there paragraphs that don't fit with my thesis that I should delete?
 - Are there ideas that I should include that aren't presently in my paper?

See <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/reverse-outline/> for a video tutorial on making descriptive outlines.