

**Academic Success Center  
Thomas Jefferson University  
East Falls Campus**

**Reverse Outlining:  
A Powerful Organization Strategy**

**Reverse Outlining**

Reverse outlining is used to determine how well you have organized your essay. It asks that you consider how ideas within paragraphs fit together, as well as how each paragraph contributes to a cohesive paper.

1. Number each paragraph so that you can refer back to it later.
2. Evaluate the internal organization of your paragraphs. On a separate piece of paper or in a separate word processing document, write down the **main idea** of each numbered paragraph. What general topic links every idea in the paragraph together? What does each sentence have in common with the others?
  - 2a. If you identify sentences that don't seem related to the others in the paragraph, consider either removing them entirely or moving them to a different paragraph where they might be better suited.
3. Next, evaluate the external organization of your paragraphs, or how the paragraphs fit with each other. Beneath where you recorded the main idea of each paragraph in Step 2, write down how the paragraph as a whole **relates to your thesis or advances your argument**. How does this paragraph fit into the "puzzle" that is your paper? How does it relate to the paragraphs around it?
  - 3a. Again, if you notice that the paragraph in question doesn't seem to fit well with the ones around it, you have two options: either move it so that it is positioned between more closely related ideas, or remove it from your paper entirely.
4. Now that you've completed the steps for reverse outline, consider the "movement" or order of your ideas throughout the paper. Do your body paragraphs seem to follow a logical sequence? Are you able to identify an overall pattern of organization in your paper?
  - 4a. If so, how would you explain this pattern to a reader to help them follow along with your paper? Try to write out your explanation, as it will help you to keep you on track as you revise.
  - 4b. If not, reorder your paragraphs or add stronger transitions (either *between* or *within* paragraphs) to create a more logical sequence of ideas.