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Reverse into Success

USING OUTLINES TO REORIENT YOUR DRAFT

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Too often I find myself finishing a different paper than the one I began. Every paper begins with a vision, but the tragedy, it seems, is that I end up with something quite different than what I set out to achieve. Your experience, at least sometimes, is probably similar. But is that necessarily a bad thing? Is changing your mind—not sticking to your guns, as it were—something you have to work to eliminate in college writing? I'm here to tell you it's not.

In high school, even at West Point, I've always excelled at in-class essays. The time crunch has forced me to produce a concise, direct argument. There hasn't been enough time, nor words on the page, to allow my pen to wander beyond the scope of my original intent. Yet, when I've sat down to write a paper of five pages or more, suddenly my flow, my ideas, and my logic just weren't cohesive. But why? Why can't we simply take our outline, our rough plan, and fill in the map with ease, for the sake of ourselves as well as our readers?

The answer is twofold: time (I know, there isn't a lot of it at West Point) and complexity. It's tempting, but we can't just allow stream-of-consciousness writing to suffice for our graded final product. And the truth is that sometimes all of us have to write our way to our ideas; more complex subjects require more careful thinking, and the best ideas aren't fully realized all at once. Therefore, a quick but effective method to address a lack of organization in initial drafts of our papers lies in what scholars call a **Reverse Outline**. Though the name says otherwise, believe me, it's progressive—something that will help you to generate your best writing.



Essentially, reverse outlines are a form of revision. Yes, this means returning to your paper. Yes, this means writing before the due date. But yes, this also means a *better paper* and, ultimately, a *better grade*.

A reverse outline approach attacks the higher order concerns of a paper; it is during this kind of revision, for instance, that you realize the 'real' start of your essay may be on p. 3, or that you actually repeat the same point you made on p. 2 on p. 4.

So take a look backwards, turn the page, and start to improve every paper you will ever write...



Sometimes a paper loses direction during its first draft...

Reverse Outlining, also known as backward outlining, is a means of intentional revision. Bottom line: it's a way for writers to rediscover their original intent, to discern where their papers waver from one idea to another, to realize their most promising ideas, and ultimately revise for a more coherent and compelling final product.

By comparing your original outline with the actual outline that can be deduced from what you've drafted, you can see clearly where a piece of writing has a 'mind of its own' and loses its purpose over the course of a multiple hours and energy drinks...with careful study, you'll be on your way to a successful revision.

THE PROCESS

First, you need a paper. Yes, a finished draft—or at least some pretty significant writing toward one. I recommend using a full writing process, including an initial outline, to create your first draft. This will not be the final product, I guarantee it.

Second, write out your intended outline. Before taking the time to read your draft, take five minutes to either review your initial outline or write down the outline of what you *intended* to compose. Any intended outline should include your thesis and main supporting points. *Don't cheat by looking at what you've drafted!* I know, it may seem redundant, but stick with me. It'll be worth it.

Third, reread your paper, and write down *its* actual outline. Creating a second outline—the **reverse outline**—can show the differences between the intended goal and the drafted product. You'll find some. Trust me. *Tip: another way to compile your reverse outline is to write the main idea or point of each paragraph in the margin next to it—then piece together the 'actual' outline of your draft from what you noted.*

Finally, compare your outlines side by side and tailor your paper to its best look. Place your outlines next to each other and find the places where you may have gone astray—or actually written your way to better point than the one you initially had! You'll be probably find that the best paper is actually one that blends elements of your original intent *and* the points you happened to think up along the way. Either way, your next step is to reconcile the differences between the outlines you've made in the paper itself. You may have to rewrite paragraphs that don't fit, or even take a hard look to see if you need to develop some paragraphs (and ideas) and throw out others. The goal is an insightful, orderly, and *unified* final product.

SOME REASONS WHY A PAPER LOSES COURSE

- ◇ it was written in one sitting
- ◇ your evidence is more supportive of a counterargument than your thesis
- ◇ you were writing in hopes of discovering your argument in the first place, rather than to communicate a finished idea (let's face it—oftentimes this is just part of the process)

FINAL THOUGHTS

- ◇ **Unfortunately, reverse outlines don't help with style or grammar.** Instead, they focus on 'higher order' concerns, like organization. Check for mechanical issues only *after* you're satisfied with the organization of your paper. Otherwise, you may create a beautiful sentence only to lose it—sounds like wasted time to me. I don't like wasted time. Not at West Point.
- ◇ **Reverse outlines can be applied anywhere!** Don't be afraid to apply the reverse outline quickly on a TEE or even an in-class essay—5 minutes can be enough to reroute any wayward meaning or seize on a promising direction!