Revision Strategies: Reverse Outlining

The following handout contains instructions and tips for completing a **reverse outline**. A reverse outline is an organizational tool that can be applied to a draft of any writing project. Reverse outlining helps you identify the main points you are trying to make, ensure those points are adequately represented in the paper, and organize those points in a logical fashion. Reverse outlines are widely utilized by academics, especially in complex and/or lengthy projects. This technique will help you produce a logical and focused piece of writing. Follow the steps below to complete a reverse outline.

1. Identify Your Thesis Statement: The thesis statement is a sentence that sums up the overarching goal of your entire paper (the argument you are making, the topic you are explaining, etc.). The thesis statement should be clearly identifiable. If you cannot find a thesis statement in your draft, you should write one. The thesis statement is commonly placed at the end of the first or second paragraph (after introducing the reader to the general topic of the paper and providing basic background information).

Examples of Thesis Statements:

- Analytical thesis statement: An analysis of the college admission process reveals one challenge facing counselors: accepting students with high test scores or students with strong extracurricular backgrounds.

- Expository thesis statement: The life of the typical college student is characterized by time spent studying, attending class, and socializing with peers.

- Argumentative thesis statement: High school graduates should be required to take a year off to pursue community service projects before entering college in order to increase their maturity and global awareness.

(examples from Purdue Online Writing Lab: owl.purdue.edu)

2. Identify the Main Points You Make in the Paper: Review your paper paragraph by paragraph. Identify the main point of each paragraph. Each paragraph should address one main idea, and that main idea should be clearly stated. If one of your paragraphs does not have a sentence that sums up its main point, you should write one. If one of your paragraphs does not have a clear main point, consider removing or revising the paragraph, or moving the sentences into other paragraphs where they may fit better. If one of your paragraphs addresses multiple separate points, consider separating those points into different paragraphs.

3. Create a List: Once you've identified your main points, you should compile them into a list. You can create a list on a separate document (recommended), or you can line up your main points by writing them in the margins of your paper. You can also use Outline View in Microsoft Word to see topics and headers at a glance.

4. Organize the List: Organize the points in a way that shows the logical progression of ideas. To organize your points, list your thesis statement first, as your thesis statement should be the 'main point' of your first

paragraph (and the paper as a whole). After the thesis statement, organize your points so that there is a clear progression from one idea to another. Use Arabic or Roman numerals to indicate the order in which the points should be made throughout the paper. This organized list of points is your outline.

5. Use the Outline to Determine Revisions:
- Does every paragraph have a clear and identifiable point? Consider revising or removing paragraphs that don't contribute to your discussion in a clear way.
- Have you made all the points you want to make? You may need to add a paragraph if you left an important point out.
- Is every point clearly related to your thesis statement? Consider revising or removing paragraphs that don't relate to your thesis statement.
- Are your main points addressed in a logical order? Start with broad, big picture ideas or themes before discussing specific details or examples.
- Is the relationship between different ideas clear? Consider adding explanatory sentences or paragraphs, or rearranging the paragraphs to establish clearer relationships between ideas.
- Have you included transitions to guide the reader along from point to point? Include transition words and phrases to signal topic changes. Also consider delineating different sections of your paper with headings and sub-headings that reflect shifts in topic.
- Do you make each main point one time? Consider combining paragraphs that make the same point, or removing paragraphs that are repetitive.

6. Use Reverse Outlining to Organize the Levels: A reverse outline can be applied to an entire paper to organize the overarching narrative from introduction to conclusion. For papers with several chapters or sections, a reverse outline can be applied to a certain chapter or section within the paper to ensure that the ideas within that section flow coherently. A reverse outline can also be applied to a single paragraph. To reverse outline a single paragraph, you should identify the main point of the paragraph, and then examine all of the sentences in the paragraph to ensure that each sentence explains, supports, or expands on the main point, and that the sentences are ordered in a way that flows logically.

Example Main Point Statements: The following points were distilled from an example paper. Each main point corresponds with one paragraph. Where there are issues with the point, they have been marked with italics.

Thesis statement: All UNM graduate students should take advantage of the resources available at the Graduate Resource Center.

Main point 1: Engaging with consultants at the Graduate Resource Center provides an opportunity for students to collaborate with their peers.

Main point 2: The resources at the graduate resource center are included in graduate student fees, so graduate students can use them at no additional cost.

Main point 3: Students who use the Graduate Resource Center tend to give positive feedback on user experience surveys.

Main point 4: The Graduate Resource Center (GRC) is a program that offers graduate students support in writing, statistics, and research development through peer consultations and workshops.
This point provides a general overview of the Graduate Resource Center. This paragraph should occur at the beginning of the paper, as it introduces the reader to the paper's main topic.

Main point 5: GRC consultants can help graduate students through the entire grad school journey, from applying to grad school to applying to jobs upon graduation.

Main point 6: User surveys suggest that students who take advantage of the Graduate Resource Center find the resources to be useful and effective.
This point is closely related to Main point 3. These paragraphs should be moved closer together or combined to avoid repetition.

Main point 7: Many UNM students wish there were more healthy food options at the Student Union Building (SUB).
This point is not clearly related to the thesis statement. The paragraph that addresses this point should be removed or revised to relate to the thesis statement.