



How to Reverse Outline a Document (Humanities)

Reverse Outlining is a tool that can be used for both notetaking and revision. It is especially helpful for organizing and understanding longer academic writing projects (e.g., literature reviews, research statements) that develop an argument across multiple paragraphs. Understanding how to use reverse outlining for notetaking is key to understanding how to use it for revision.

What does it look like to take notes using a reverse outline?

Reverse outlining focuses on understanding an argument at the paragraph level. Taking notes that summarize the main idea of each paragraph can help you to follow the author's (or your own!) argument across a document.

How can you revise using a reverse outline?

When we write a longer document, we need to ensure that not only does the content of our document connect logically, but also that its organization helps guide our readers to understand our purpose. This is done in two ways:

Organizing by content

The first step of revising is ensuring that all the necessary ideas are present. Taking notes on *what* is in our document will help us guarantee that we haven't left anything out or included anything unnecessary. We can also group ideas at this stage so that our sentences or paragraphs are organized by topic.

Organizing by argument

Information alone doesn't convey our intention to a reader. After taking notes to reverse outline the *content* of a section of a paper, labeling the purpose of each paragraph can help you spot any repetitions, gaps, or other places where information is introduced out of order relative to your argument. For instance, if you would like to put a document into context, does it make more sense to describe the political, social, or historical context first? Have you tried to emphasize the significance of a finding in multiple locations or too early/late in your paper for it to have its best impact?

Where the content or purpose of each paragraph does not connect effectively across the section(s), you can move or edit paragraphs to better support the aims of your paper. If you would like support with this process, a Graduate Writing Center consultation is a great next step.

Example

To see an example of reverse outlining according to both note-taking and purpose, consider the following excerpt from the introduction to Joseph (2009) and note how the content and structure of the argument can be seen in these annotations:

[A] "By all rights, there no longer should be much question about the meaning at least the intended meaning of Black Power," the journalist Charles Sutton observed in January 1967. "Between the speeches and writings of Stokely Carmichael, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (sncc)," Sutton continued, "the explanations of Floyd McKissick, director of the Congress of Racial Equality (core), and the writings of more than a score of scholars and commentators, the slogan and its various assumptions have been fairly thoroughly examined."

Main Idea: In 1967, Sutton argues that Black Power (BP) should be a clear concept since primary and secondary sources are well studied.

Purpose: Citing a source to contrast against, to illustrate the widespread BP debate

[B] Clearly Sutton was wrong. Despite efforts to define it both then and today, "black power" exists in the American imagination through a series of iconic, yet fleeting images ranging from gun-toting Black Panthers to black-gloved sprinters at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics that powerfully evoke the eras confounding mixture of triumph and tragedy. Indeed, the iconography of Stokely Carmichael in Greenwood, Mississippi, Black Panthers marching outside an Oakland, California, courthouse, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation's wanted poster for Angela Davis serves as a kind of visual short hand to understanding the history of the era, but such images tell us very little about the movement that birthed them.

Main Idea: Visual images of BP are disconnected from the meaning of the movement, despite being an easy way to reference it.

Purpose: To provide counter examples to the opening quotation, inviting further examination of the topic.

[C] This fact has been complicated by conventional civil rights narratives, which, until recently, accepted as wisdom the idea that black power undermined struggles for racial justice. Those narratives differed more in their level of condemnation than in their analysis of the black power movement's self-destructive impact. The embrace, at times, of violent rhetoric, misogyny, and bravado by black power advocates have made them and their struggles easy targets for demonization and dismissal. For instance, black power stands at the center of declension narratives of the 1960s: the movement's destructiveness poisoning the innocence of the New Left, corrupting a generation of black activists, and steering the drive for civil rights off course in a way that reinforced racial segregation by giving politicians a clear, frightening scapegoat. The backlash that followed seemingly destroyed the potential of the civil rights movement to establish new democratic frontiers. This narrative still too often provides the basis for popular understandings, as well as scholarly framings, of black power as an unabashed failure and a negative counterpart to more righteous struggles for racial integration, social justice, and economic equality.

Main Idea: Misunderstanding around the BP movement has been enhanced by narratives that scapegoat it relative to the larger civil rights movement.

Purpose: To move beyond lack of awareness of the movement to examining misunderstandings or vilifications of the movement

[D] Given the overwhelmingly negative images associated with black power, efforts to define it have largely been arbitrary. Until recently, perspectives on the movement were shaped primarily by the memory of those who saw it only as an angry response to the slow pace of the struggle for civil rights. Not surprisingly, a clear working definition of black power has proven elusive, especially since it was so often viewed as the civil rights movements "evil" twin.

Main Idea: Clear definitions of the movement have been frustrated by these negative perceptions.

Purpose: To establish the need to reexamine the movement, pivoting to the next paragraph which discusses new scholarly approaches on the topic.

Source: Joseph, Peniel E. "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field." *The Journal of American History*, vol. 96, no. 3, 2009, pp. 751–76, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/96.3.751>