Reverse Outlining to assess logic and flow

GRS Writing Group – WED 06 AUG 2017

Simply stated, a reverse outline is an outline that we create from an existing text; rather than turning an outline into a text, we are turning a text into an outline. Regardless of whether or not you create an outline before you write, creating one after you have written a first draft can be invaluable. A reverse outline will reveal the structure—and thus the structural problems—of a text.

- Rachael Cayley, Graduate Centre for Academic Communication, University of Toronto. Exploration of Styles blog. Reverse Outlines Feb 2011. https://explorationsofstyle.com/2011/02/09/reverse-outlines/

In the process of drafting and revising your text, there are a number of reasons why you might jump straight into editing or proofing to correct lower level concerns:

(1) You are probably working with your on text on screen and only seeing a paragraph at a time, or using a printout where you might be looking at 2-3 paragraphs on a page. It is difficult to think about the 'big picture' when you are working on details of a picture.

(2) Editing and proofing small sections of text is cognitively less taxing than looking at the logic and flow of a large section of text. You may consciously or unconsciously avoid revising your text if you are tired or if the text bores or frustrates you.

(3) If you have spent time and energy editing a section of text, you will be very resistant to revising the text for high level concerns as this is likely to require re-editing.

To be an efficient and effective academic writer you need to examine the order of the main ideas you are presenting in a systematic and efficient way early in the revision process. A reverse outline allows you to look at broad structural concerns – like patterns of organisation, repetition, redundancy – without getting distracted by lower level concerns that can be addressed at a later date by editing and proofing.

7 steps to creating a reverse outline:

1 Number the paragraphs

2 Identify the topic of each paragraph – generally the topic should be close to the beginning of the paragraph. If you have multiple topics you may need to divide the information into 2 paragraphs.

3 Arrange these topics into an outline

4 Analyse this outline – talking your way through the outline will test your understanding of how the main ideas connect. Understanding patterns of organisation can also help in this analysis.

5 Create a revised outline – shift units of information, reduce, remove or add units of information

6 Reorganize the text according to the revised outline

7 Check for topic sentences and cohesion

Committing to Extensive Revision - Exploration of Styles blog
https://explorationsofstyle.com/2011/01/19/committing-to-extensive-revision

Truth in Outlining - Exploration of Styles blog
https://explorationsofstyle.com/2013/08/29/truth-in-outlining/

Patterns of Organization
https://bconline.broward.edu/shared/CollegeReadiness/Reading/U05_PatOrg/U05_PatOrg_print.html

Next session: WED SEP 20 Parallel Construction of Lists

Further details of the UWA GRS Writing Group, including advice sheets to download, here:
www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/students/resources/communities#writinggroup