INKWELL

READING AS WRITER:
THE REVERSE OUTLINE

Emily W. Gray

My junior year at Evergreen I took a course on brain development. We were assigned a popular science book, and my professors encouraged the class to take notes in new ways. They offered a number of suggestions, and I chose to use what is called a "bubble organizer." When I finished a chapter, I wrote, in one sentence, its main point. I put that in the middle of my notepaper with a circle around it. Out of the circle I drew six lines connecting to smaller circles, in which I wrote one idea supporting the main point.

Not only was this a powerful synthesizing tool that forced me to reckon with my understanding of the reading, but when I reviewed my notes, I realized I had a reverse outline of the entire text. At a glance, I could see the main points of each chapter and their auxiliary ideas, with examples to support them. If I'd set out to write the book myself, I might have drafted just the outline I was holding. By reverse outlining the book, I was able to see beyond the narrative to its structural foundation.

Summarizing each section of a piece can form a cohesive overview. This might look like summarizing chapter by chapter, as I did with the science book. With an essay it might look like noting key points paragraph by paragraph, or even sentence by sentence. Reverse outlining helps us to turn from reading as a reader to reading as a writer. Instead of passively accepting the content of the book, we can reflect on the deliberate choices the author has made—even when that author is us.

A quick distinction: an initial outline is different than a reverse outline. Initial outlining helps us organize our ideas before we begin drafting. In my writing process, it is the step that comes between brainstorming and drafting—it helps me anchor my thoughts in a possible order.

A reverse outline, on the other hand, requires that we at least have a draft. It helps us revise. From the draft, we try to create a sketch of the ideas in each section.

Say I'm writing my self-evaluation. I may make a reverse outline about form by noting which parts indicate my introduction, key ideas, and conclusion. Or, I could look for one particular theme—say the class was on ethnobotany and I want to highlight where and how fieldwork

comes up. By noting every example of fieldwork, I can see how I have constructed the narrative of my hands-on experience. Maybe I thought it was the central idea in my self-evaluation, but after reverse outlining, I see that fieldwork is only mentioned once or twice. From there, I know where to re-work my evaluation to include examples that show how important fieldwork was to my learning.

The beauty of reverse outlining is that you can be as general or as specific as you want, and you can reverse outline based on any number of criteria. Some examples would be:

- Do all of the paragraphs help the thesis, or do some of them introduce ideas that are tangential to the main point?
- If there is no explicit thesis, can an underlying purpose be discerned?
- Is there sufficient evidence for central and supporting arguments?
- If there are counterarguments, where are they located?
- Does the tone switch from formal to informal language?
- Does the voice vary between first, second, and/or third person?
- Does it go from active to passive voice?

As a writer, I understand how difficult it can be to look at our work with any sort of objectivity or distance. We're so enmeshed in our writing that it's hard to see the work with a fresh perspective. The reverse outline is a tool that can give us just that, or something close to it. By stepping back from the prose, we can see what it is we're actually doing to create the framework for our writing. As readers, the reverse outline can help us better understand the process of the writer so that we may learn from them about their form and technique, as well as their content. Likewise, as writers, the reverse outline has the potential to help us see what we've already said in our writing so that we can better know where we should go next. Whether as writers or as readers, the reverse outline is a valuable tool for us all. ◊

Editor's Note: Aren't convinced yet that reverse outlining is the next need-to-have tool in your writer's kit? Check out these additional resources for information:

- [Purdue University Online Writing Lab's explanation of and directions for reverse outlining](#)
- [Duke University Writing Studio's in-depth discussion of how to make and use a reverse outline](#) (PDF)
- [Academic writing blog Explorations of Style's post on reverse outlining](#), in which they write, "[The reverse outline] is effective because it creates an objective distance between you and your text."
- [Author Aaron Hamburger's "Outlining in Reverse," an essay on reverse outlining for fiction published on the New York Times Opinionator blog](#)

But don't just take my, or their, word for it. The best way to see the value of the reverse outline is to try it yourself!