

“Backwards” Outlining Your Research Paper

Carefully look at each paragraph you’ve written and write down a sentence or two in some separate writing space - a clean sheet of paper, a clear screen on your computer - **about what this paragraph basically is doing and saying.**

Do this for every paragraph until you have one or two sentences for each, arranged in outline form. The sentences should be entirely descriptive of how the paragraph is acting in and on the developing document, and each sentence should contain clear and appropriate verbs:

“paragraph 1 describes . . .”; “paragraph 2 develops . . .”; “paragraph 3 defines . . .”;
“paragraph 4 lists . . .”

Once you have completed your outline, answer these questions about each paragraph:

1. Is there one main topic or idea in most (if not all) paragraphs?
2. Were there any paragraphs you couldn’t easily write a sentence about? If so, look at those closely and be very open to revising them.
3. Are there any paragraphs not serving the basic purpose of the document? Do any fly off on tangents or soften rather than sharpen the documents focus? If so, cut ruthlessly.
4. Does the idea in any particular paragraph need more development, more data, more anything?
5. Is the paragraph logically connected to those before and after, and are the connections made clear with explicit links?
6. Comparing your sentence to the paragraph it describes, do you detect any muddle? Does the paragraph flow smoothly?