

WRITING WORKSHOP BRIEF GUIDE SERIES

“Put Your Thing Down, Flip it, and
REVERSE it”:

Reverse Outlining As Told by Missy Elliot

Part one: “Is it worth it?”

A reverse outline can be the ultimate structuring tool. When you feel like your paper is disorganized, you’re not sure if all your ideas make sense together, or you have too many ideas or not enough, a reverse outline might be the answer for you.

Reverse outlining is the creation of an outline based on your already-written draft to see if your body paragraphs have a clear purpose stated in the topic sentence, are in the right place, and all help further your overall argument. Here’s how it works.

In this part, you figure out the main idea in each paragraph and how it relates to your thesis.

Step one: Write down your thesis at the top of a separate sheet of paper.

Step two: Read your first paragraph and, in a few words, write down the main idea.

Step Three: In a few more words, write down how this idea relates to your thesis.

Step Four: Complete this process for the remaining paragraphs in the essay.

Example #1

Thesis: Scholars explain what race really means, but their work is hard to access.

Paragraph one:

- Main idea: Scholars write about how to be aware of race
- Relates to thesis: Scholars explain what race really means

Paragraph two:

- Main idea: Scholars publish in exclusive journals and talk about how race guides our everyday interactions
- Relates to thesis: Not everyone can access this information

Paragraph three:

- Main idea: Queer theory gives individuals the tools to be critical about race
- Relates to thesis: We have the power to change the way we think about race ourselves

Paragraph four:

- Main idea: Scholars are not responsible for reaching everyone
- Relates to thesis: How do we talk about race without them

Paragraph five: Conclusion

If you are having trouble

- Maybe your paragraph has too many ideas
 - Try breaking up your paragraph into two or more
 - Think about which idea is really the one you want to write about
- Maybe you don't quite have an idea
 - Think about why you included the paragraph to begin with

Questions to ask about your reverse outline

- Is the main idea of each paragraph represented in the topic sentence?
- Does the order of these paragraphs make sense?
- Does my thesis actually reflect the argument my paper makes? The argument I really want to make?

“Ti esrever dna ti pilf nwod gniht ruoy tup.”

Thanks, Missy Elliot, for teaching us that nothing becomes clear until you reverse it.

Part Two: “Let me work it.”

In this part, you will look to revise and re-“work” your essay. Chances are, in making a reverse outline, issues in your paper will have become clearer to you.

You might realize that your paper makes a different argument than the one you had intended to make.

Or, you might notice your topic sentences are actually buried within your paragraph.

Let's apply “**Questions to ask about your reverse outline**” to “**Example #1**”

1) **Is the main idea of each paragraph represented in the topic sentence?**

The first thing to notice is that the main idea of paragraph two is too long. It includes two ideas: “Scholars publish in exclusive journals” and “talk about how race guides our everyday interactions.” This second idea could be its own paragraph.

2) **Does the order of these paragraphs make sense?** The next thing to notice is that paragraph four seems to pose a question (“How do we talk about race without [scholars]”) that paragraph three answers (“We have the power to change the way we think about race ourselves”). Maybe these paragraphs should be switched.

3) **Does my thesis actually reflect the argument my paper makes? The argument I really want to make?**

Finally, paragraph three, which we have determined would be better as paragraph four, is not mentioned in the thesis. Modifying the thesis might help the reader know at the beginning where the paper is headed.

A better thesis might look like this: “Scholars explain what race really means, but because their work is hard to access, we must create a conversation ourselves to truly affect the way we think and talk about race.”

Example #2

A more successful version of this paper might have a reverse outline that looks like this:

Thesis: Scholars explain what race really means, but because their work is hard to access, we must create a conversation ourselves to truly affect the way we think and talk about race.

Paragraph one:

- Main idea: Scholars talk about how race guides our everyday interactions
- Relates to thesis: Scholars explain what race really means

Paragraph two:

- Main idea: Scholars publish in exclusive journals
- Relates to thesis: Not everyone can access this information

Paragraph three:

- Main idea: But scholars are not responsible for reaching everyone
- Relates to thesis: How do we talk about race without them

Paragraph four:

- Main idea: Queer theory gives individuals the tools to be critical about race
- Relates to thesis: We have the power to change the way we think about race ourselves

Paragraph five: Conclusion

Explanation of Example #2

In this outline, the main ideas reflect strong topic sentences that build off of one another.

- The author shows how scholars explain what race really means
- Then that scholars publish in exclusive journals
- And then that scholars do not have the responsibility to account for this
- This leaves the author well situated to challenge the ordinary individual and find a new way to gain a critical awareness.

To translate this reverse outline back into an essay, the author would have to make sure that:

- The main idea of each paragraph is introduced in the topic sentence of each paragraph
- There is evidence to support each topic sentence throughout each paragraph
- Each paragraph ends by transitioning into the next

Sources of Interest:

Keep scrolling to read the paper used for Examples #1 and #2

Making a reverse outline also works for readings:
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/689/1/>

Video emphasizing flow of ideas:
<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/reverse-outline/>

Encouraging video with fun graphics that talks about how the topic sentences should fall under the “umbrella” of the thesis:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ilWXiY10o8>

How to make a typical outline, before you write your paper:

<http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/web/outline.html>

Who is “We”?

Though the conception of race in America has evolved, the surprise at its significance in guiding daily life has remained ever present. Race is simultaneously embedded in “*every* identity, institution and social practice in the United States,” yet is still not recognized as the basis for how people “make sense of the things they do and see” (Omi & Winant, 6; Fields 110). Part of this disconnect comes from the fact that critical racial discourse, as it exists today, is usually a topic reserved for professionals. Politicians, administrators, neighbors, and friends can all talk about race (or not), but deciphering what it really means is left to the people who study it. The only problem with this is that their work is often hard to access. Scholars explain what race really means, but because their work is hard to access, we must create a conversation ourselves to truly affect the way we think and talk about race.

Many professional scholars, for the sake of upholding their discipline, are limited to portraying the world as it is rather than how it should be; they are encouraged to sacrifice intention for objectivity. This is very important, as in objectivity there is power, but it is difficult to totally eliminate intention from a scholar’s work. Indeed, many of the authors that will be discussed seem to have a shared intention of promoting awareness: for Michael Omi and Howard Winant, only until one is aware that race is *everywhere* can one begin to engage in a discussion of racial formation (6); for Barbara Fields, only when one becomes aware that their racial ideology is a (mindless) routine can they begin to confront it and reconsider their method of understanding (113); for Dikotter, it is the awareness that race is constructed differently in different societies that allows for the realization that it is indeed a construction, and for Barnard, becoming aware of the limiting nature of racial identification, indeed identification itself, is what inspires one to transcend it.

Awareness for these authors is the first step towards addressing the power and pervasiveness of race, but it is not a coincidence that they all stop there. Advancing a more obvious agenda would risk depriving their work of credibility, to be sure, but there is more going on here. In merely pushing for raising awareness, they acknowledge that awareness has not yet been achieved; if everyone were aware, no one would need reminding.

This is because there is a gap between those who write about what to be aware of and those who remain unaware. It is not that the information does not exist; it is that it exists in the exclusive realm of academia. Scholars are encouraged to engage with other scholars and their students before anyone else. While Omi and Winant published a book, which presumably anyone could read, most of the authors, Fields, Dikotter, and Barnard, published their works in academic journals, the *New Left Review*, *China Quarterly*, and *Social Semiotics*, respectively. Even if it is easy to get access to these books and journals, it is not easy to get access to people and places that unpack them, mainly, professors and universities.

This is not to suggest that it is the responsibility of academics to modify their work to address larger audiences, but rather to introduce the question as to how awareness might be attained. If Omi and Winant, Fields, Dikotter, and Barnard were widely read, perhaps raising awareness would lose relevance. Perhaps, instead of awareness, conversation might turn towards what to do with it. But the truth is, they are not widely read. It is not the place of academics to turn their work into propaganda nor is it their responsibility to make everyone into an academic. So how then do we expand the space in which racial conceptions are discussed to include the very people who contribute to these conceptions?

It is in this vein that Richard Thompson Ford talks about using queer theory “to take race politics back from the professionals” (Ford, 483). Queer theory, he suggests, “is not interested in mainstream social conventions” but rather “in shaking them up;” it is not interested in “pretentious and preachy diction” but rather a “closer and fresher connection with everyday life”

(Ford 483; Ford 484). Before deconstructing the construction that is race, confronting racial ideology, considering what it means when race takes different forms in different places, or demonstrating what it means to transcend racial identity, one must first adopt the way of seeing the world advocated in queer theory. One must use “critique as a *style*” (Ford, 484). Rather than viewing Ford’s piece a way to trivialize professional racial theory, one must understand it as a plea for a system of understanding that returns agency to the individual. She who subscribes to queer theory is given a critical lens with which to see everything that will hopefully change what she knows everything to be.

In their repetition of the idea that race is simultaneously everywhere and yet invisible, the authors discussed suggest that just as conceptions of race have changed, they must continue to change. As Fields suggests, race is not just a social construct; it is *in social construction*. And “we,” those who are consciously and unconsciously shaping and reshaping must take ownership of our participation. The critical perspective Ford promotes can enable this, whether it leads one to discover and then wrestle with authors like Omi and Winant, Fields, Dikotter, and Barnard, or simply to ask the questions many do not want to hear, let alone acknowledge that they exist. Academics study race and induce and develop conversation about it. “We” must not wait for this conversation to come to us, must not let it remain among the elite. “We” are responsible for becoming critical enough of the world around us to forge our own way to joining in.

Bibliography:

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- Dklotter, F. (1994). “Racial Identities in China: Context and Meanings,” *China Quarterly*
- Barnard, I. (1999). “Queering Race,” *Social Semiotics*
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