Reverse Outlines:

Reverse outlines are outlines we create from an existing text. Regardless of whether you create an outline before you write, creating one after you have written a draft can be invaluable. A reverse outline will reveal the structure—and thus the structural problems—of a text.

Step #1: In the left-hand margin of your essay, write down the topic of each paragraph. Try to use as few words as possible, but also try to convey the essence of that paragraph.

Purpose: Collectively, these notes should tell you if each paragraph is focused and clear. If the paragraph currently contains information that does not fit your description, it may need to be eliminated or moved to another location in your essay.

Step #2: In the right-hand margin, write down how the paragraph topic advances the overall argument of the text.

Purpose: When revising your work, these notes should tell you if each paragraph fits in the overall organization of your paper. You may also notice that paragraphs should be shifted after completing this step. Consider both the logic (where the elements are placed in relation to one another) and proportion (how much space is devoted to each element).

Suggestions: Keep your notes brief. If you cannot complete each step in 5-10 words, you may need to consider revising the paragraph.

You may find it useful to expand these notes into an actual outline. This outline will give you a better sense of the shape of your essay, which is particularly helpful for visual thinkers. However, in many cases, the marginal writing will be enough to prompt you to revise problematic sections of text.

The reverse outline creates a critical distance between you and your text, allowing you to view it differently and making it a little less resistant to your efforts to revise it.

* Reverse outlines are also a great tool for breaking down (and making sense of) complex or difficult reading assignments. Follow the steps outlined above to break down the text and make it easier to analyze and discuss later.