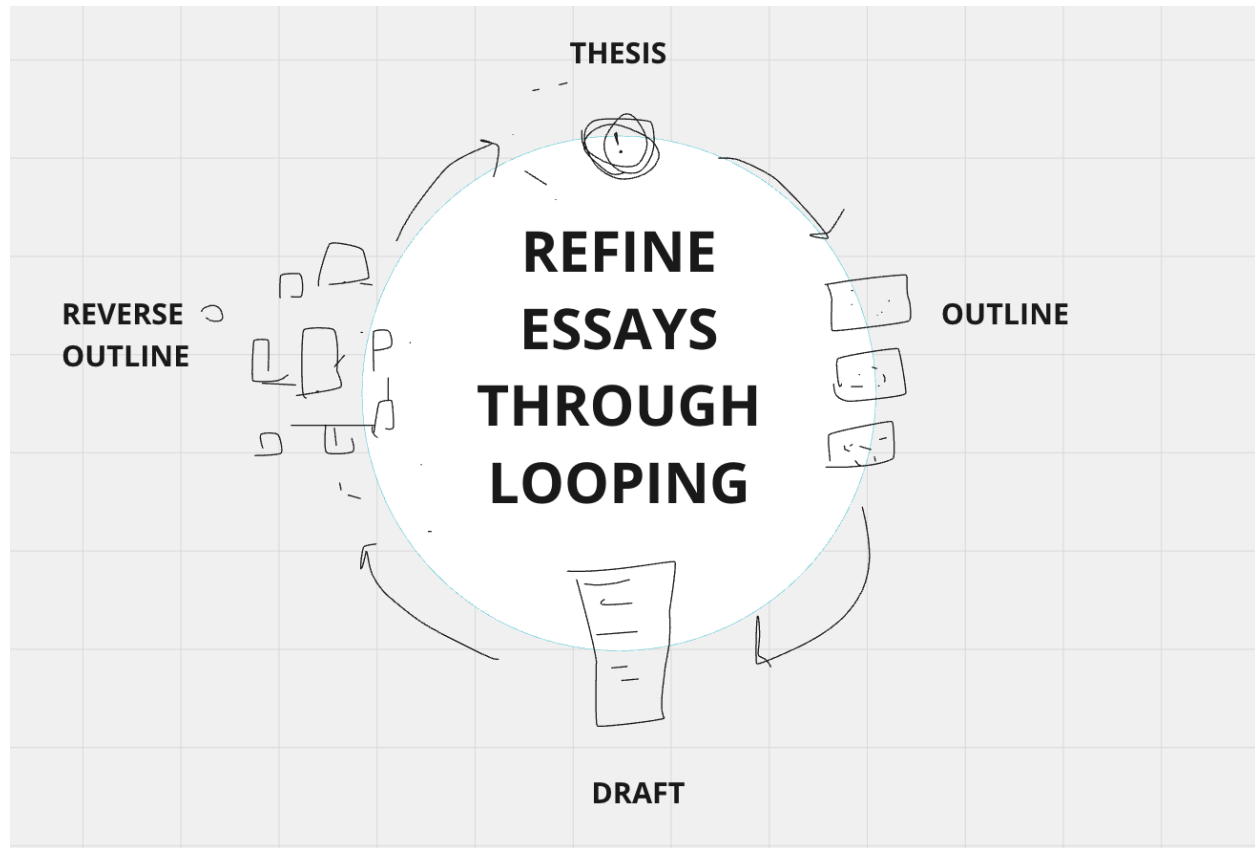


Reverse Outlines

How to Restructure Your First Draft

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1) Archive your draft

Don't perform word surgery without making a backup. If you don't, editing becomes tense. What if you make all the wrong moves, and the essay falls into an irreparable state? This tension is silly, but real. Even though Google Docs has a version history, archiving your draft is symbolic permission to bring out the sledgehammer. Make a copy. Ctrl+C > Ctrl+V. Do whatever you need to feel comfortable making big structural changes.

2) Re-cluster your sentences

A first draft is often a tangled knot of ideas. Even though headers and paragraphs are visual aids to help us grasp the grouping of ideas, they're often misleading. Delete your headers. Re-read your draft, and re-cluster your sentences so each paragraph is a distinct unit of thought. It's okay if some paragraphs are small fragments, and others are walls of text. Adjust the spacing so that every chunk of text is an indivisible idea. This helps you visualize the seams between your ideas. You can't re-structure until you know the atomic elements you're working with.

3) Give a temporary title to each paragraph

It's hard to grasp your structure when all your ideas are expanded as long strings of words. It's too much information for our brain to process. The solution here seems hardcore, unnecessary, and time-consuming, but try it. Give each paragraph a title. It's a good exercise in comprehension, compression, and coining phrases. You can delete them later. But for now, these paragraph titles will become the "bullet points" in the outline you're about to make. Unlike the vague, mysterious, potentially explosive bullets you make before you outline, these ones have specific blurbs associated with each one.

4) Create your 'reverse outline' at the top of the page

So now you have useful mini-titles scattered throughout the document, but you can't see them all in one view. Rewrite your paragraph headers as a list at the top. To start, put them in the same order. It lets you see the current arc of the essay. You've compressed your messy three-page draft into a small list of objects that you can hold in your working memory. Now you're ready to analyze your outline and look for patterns.

5) Find your center of gravity

As you scan through your list of ideas, you may realize your essay is a dumpster fire. It's out of control. There might be tangents, competing ideas, and defensive nuances that nobody cares about. What is the single idea that's most worth conveying? Maybe one of your bullets is actually the center of gravity that all the other ideas should orbit around. Or maybe, there is an unnamed pattern between three of the ideas in your list. Sit with your list for a few minutes, and think of all the possible ways you can relate the elements to each other. When something pops out at you, write it as a sentence at the top of your outline. You're going to re-organize your outline around this idea.

6) Refine your outline

Now you have a center of gravity, and a random list of ideas. Time to fix that. You'll want to group, indent, rearrange, cut, and add bullet points to shape your story. Your outline is your planning tool where you can see your whole essay at a birds-eye overview. It's easier to plot out how suspense, details, and transformations unfold through your structure. It can be as detailed or lo-fi as you want. You might even want to rewrite your (temporary) bullet names so they clearly state *how* they're serving your main idea. This is your new scaffolding.

7) Decide to keep or delete your old paragraphs

At this point, you have two things. At the top of your doc, you have a new outline, and below that is your old draft. You'll want to make one more section at the bottom— the graveyard. This is where all your deleted ideas will go. Now, look through each paragraph starting from the top. You have a decision to make on each one. Do I shift this up into the outline? Or down into the graveyard? By the end of the process, your first draft disappears. You'll have chunks of text within your outline, and a graveyard of ideas that didn't make the cut.

8) Re-write your essay

Chances are, since your paragraphs were transplanted, nothing will feel linked together. Starting from the top, one paragraph at a time, it's time to re-write your essay. Re-writing lets you better articulate the same ideas, and situate it with the new arc of your essay. Use more specific and visual language, and cut out the bloated and abstract words. I recommend re-writing new paragraphs right above the old ones. As soon as the new paragraph feels complete, delete the old one below it, and keep moving down. Keep going until you reach the end, and boom, you've got a second draft.