

## **BACKWARDS OUTLINING**

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Backwards outlining consists of taking a piece of writing and creating an outline based on the existing structure of the draft to compare against and/or help create the thesis of a paper. The outline is created by taking each body paragraph, identifying what it contributes to the argument of the paper, and summarizing the main idea of the paragraph in one or two sentences. This outline can then guide the reviser as he or she works on the organization, thesis, introduction and conclusion paragraphs, or argument.

### What is Backwards Outlining Useful for?

- Demonstrating how a thesis and body paragraphs differ from (or relate to) each other.
- If you are having trouble constructing a thesis for an existing draft.
- If your thesis does not contain the same argument as the body of the paper.
- If you are writing a long paper, backwards outlining can be useful to identify weaker parts of your argument.
- Working on building an effective argument (re-ordering evidence in the most effective, persuasive way)
- Checking to see if the paper answers the assignment sheet (compare a skeletal outline constructed from the assignment sheet with a backwards outline).
- Coming up with topic sentences and transitions.

### Backwards Outlining is Done as Follows:

1. Skim through the first body paragraph of the paper.
2. Decide the topic of the paragraph and write down enough words in the margin to represent what is in the paragraph. Ask, "What is the point of this paragraph?" or "What exactly are you saying about this subject?" or "How does this paragraph reflect your thesis?" Make sure to label each paragraph. Repeat for each paragraph.
3. Examine the list of descriptions that you have made for each paragraph and ensure that you can identify a sentence that clearly states the main point in each paragraph.
4. If the main point of a paragraph is not clearly stated, ask questions to identify the core of the paragraph, such as, "What does this paragraph add to the rest of the paper?" Then write these sentences down.
5. Now go back to the introductory paragraph. Identify the thesis. Identify connections between the main idea of each paragraph and the thesis. If the material is unrelated, either the paragraph or thesis may need to be modified.
6. Now identify the key points or evidence in the paragraph. Summarize these under each main point.
7. Now that you connected each paragraph to the overall argument, determine if there is a consistent, logical structure in the organization of these ideas.
  - Does the order of the paragraphs make a difference?
  - Does the organization effectively support and advance the argument?
  - What order might help with transitions? If there are problems with the sequence of paragraphs, rearrange the ideas to improve the organization and effectiveness of the argument.
  - Is your evidence in the right paragraph?

Example:

Thesis statement: The aerobics craze of the 1980's oppressed women by forcing them to focus on body image as the sole expression of femininity, thereby distracting them from economic, political, and social pursuits.

1. The 1980s was a time of social, political and economic change.
  - US fell into a major recession
  - Time of backlash from the second wave of feminism and the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s and 70s.
2. An exercise industry boomed to fill women's need to be socially accepted.
  - Acceptance and success were achievable through weight loss.
  - Weight loss became measurable and competitive, giving women a way of measuring themselves against one another and experiencing achievement that they were unable to obtain in the work force
  - Retailers—struggling through the recession spurred by losses of manufacturing jobs—found an easy product and burgeoning industry in aerobics.
3. Preoccupations with exercise and weight-loss stymied the feminist movement.
  - Women stopped competing with men about equal pay for equal roles/work.
  - Women were busy fighting an internal war against their bodies and an external battle with one another measured by weight loss and gain.
4. Exercise videos, like Jane Fonda's, were ostensibly meant to motivate women to get fit, but actually reasserted stereotypes about feminine passivity.
  - Jane Fonda's at-home aerobics videos were marketed as easy and enjoyable ways for busy women to achieve their ideal bodies.
  - Fonda's exercise videos contained taut young exercisers in sexy outfits, which caused women to feel insecure.
  - Women were not exercising to achieve personal fitness, but instead, they exercised to build bodies that men would find attractive.
5. Filled with overt references to sex, aerobics videos reinforce the objectification of women as objects for male sexual pleasure.
  - Rather than promoting physical fitness, aerobics videos use vocabulary and terminology that imply sexual acts and favors.
  - Aerobics instructors' provocative movements encourage women to be subordinate, and therefore, the aerobics videos place women back into compliant and traditional roles.
6. Because popular culture celebrated and normalized images of female passivity in provocative aerobics shows, female subordination became normalized in other realms of society.
  - Images of submissive, sexy women proliferated due to mass media.
  - Inundated with images of passive women, both men and women adopted the idea that in order to be sexy, the female body must be conquerable.
  - Negative attitudes toward women manifested themselves in political provisions for women's rights and equality.

7. Confining women to particular societal roles furthered the capitalistic and patriarchal agendas of the 1980s in the United States.
  - During the Cold War, the Reagan administration advocated for a return to the basic American family structure, relegating women to the home.
  - Because men were compensated for their work and women were encouraged to work at home unpaid, the government rewarded and valued men's work over women's.

Conclusion:

- The downfall of the feminist movement in the 1980s is, in part, attributable to the aerobics craze.
- Aerobics provided women, who might be disoriented by their new political freedom, a safe and familiar way to revert back to political, socio-economic, and sexual subservience.