Reverse Outlining Self-Review Lesson Plan/ Homework

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May 2011

A “reverse outline” is the practice of taking a completed essay and crafting its outline. This can be useful to students to observe how their arguments evolve over the course of an essay; where their arguments meander or get lost; and how an essay might be re-organized in order to become more coherent. This assignment is best done between the first and second drafts of a major paper. It could be done in class, or as homework.

1. Ask students to highlight their claim. If it’s not in the first paragraph, ask them to highlight the roadmap, analytic question, or other means by which they communicate what the essay is about.

2. Ask students to highlight every topic sentence in every body paragraph. If there are more than one topic sentences per paragraph, they should highlight both. If there are no topic sentences, they should highlight the most representative and important sentence of the paragraph. This might look like a transition sentence, or an intertextual comparison, or another method of moving the argument forward.

3. Ask students to highlight the best concluding sentence in the conclusion. If they didn’t begin with a strong claim in the intro, they should be able to find it here.

4. Have student take a clean sheet of paper, and re-write the highlighted sentences in order. This is their “reverse outline.”

5. Now’s the time for self-reflection. Students should assess the progression of sentences: does one lead logically to the next? Do they build an argument, using evidence and analysis? Do any of the sentences repeat themselves (perhaps these paragraphs should be consolidated)? Do any of the paragraphs have more than one topic sentence (perhaps these need to be broken up)? Does this “narrative” of the essay accurately reflect the argument they thought they were making?

This assignment works well as a motor for focused, substantive revision (Outcome 4). It also scaffolds for self-assessment and awareness of one’s writing practices.