IWU's WCTS Presents:
A Guide to Reverse Outlining

This method is particularly useful when you have a paper that isn't flowing as it ought to, doesn't appear to be organized, or is missing important information and/or connections. For reverse outlining, then, you *must* already have a draft that you are working to improve. As opposed to standard outlining where you create a draft from the outline, reverse outlining creates an outline from the draft so you can see where more information, analysis, evidence, etc. is needed in your paper.

How it works:

You look carefully at each paragraph of your essay and outline the main ideas there. What your topic sentence is, for example, becomes the "theme" or "subject" of that paragraph. You then look to see if you have evidence, analysis, and clear connections, making a note of what is and is not present. Let's take the following as an example:

> Because the wealthy Lady Lodestone follows social dictates and relies on men like Compass for advice, her standing is better than many of her fellow early modern widows. At the same time, however, due to her status as a widow, her household must toe a line of proper comportment to avoid pitfalls that would otherwise go largely ignored in a couple's home. Garthine Walker explains that a "properly governed household was characterised by orderly and appropriate conduct within it, with due authority and deference being displayed as precise relationships demanded, and the absence of illicit alliances of all kinds" (11). Thus, Lady Loadstone's household is likely to be even more critically viewed in light of this relationship and Lady Loadstone's status within the community. Therefore, coupling her "niece's" unwed pregnancy with the fact that this is a widow's home, a jury might determine that Mistress Polish's residence allowed for continued concealment of her crime.

> A good paragraph starts with a clear topic sentence but there isn't one here. Why is this paragraph important? We don't know!

> Evidence should be introduced and *then* analyzed to show how it supports a claim. But this evidence isn't connected clearly to what has come before.

> The unclear evidence is also not properly analyzed, which means the claim of the paper is falling apart in this paragraph.

This example shows how one weak element, in this case a poor topic sentence, snowballs into other weak elements, like a lack of a clear connection between the evidence and the claim and poor analysis of the evidence. But, we can fix it by using that reverse outline to revamp the paragraph for a stronger structure:

A reverse outline for this paragraph might look like this one:

> **Pro-tip**: It may seem weird, but color coding your paragraphs can help! Also note that this example is from an English lit paper. Your professor may have other genre conventions she, they, or he want you to use as you write.

A) Topic: wealthy widow, social status – not clear
1. Evidence – a quote from Walker's book (add title?)
2. Analysis of quote – needs a better link to wealth and status
3. Wrap-Up for paragraph is pretty strong

> It is important to note that society's views of widows were far less trusting than is indicated by Jonson's apparently unblemished character, Lady Loadstone. Because this wealthy lady follows social dictates and relies on men like Compass for advice, her standing is better than many of her fellow early modern widows. At the same time, however, due to her status as a widow, her household must toe a line of proper comportment to avoid pitfalls that would otherwise go largely ignored in a couple's home. Garthine Walker, in her text *Crime, Gender, and Social Order in Early Modern England*, explains the importance of household order, writing that a "properly governed household was characterised by orderly and appropriate conduct within it, with due authority and deference being displayed as precise relationships demanded, and the absence of illicit alliances of all kinds" (11). Thus, while Lady Loadstone's household could be judged harshly -- even if it had a man at the helm -- due to the illicit alliance between the replaced Placentia and her child's unnamed father, it is likely to be even more critically viewed in light of this relationship and Lady Loadstone's status within the community. Therefore, coupling her "niece's" unwed pregnancy with the fact that this is a widow's home, a jury might determine that Mistress Polish's residence allowed for continued concealment of her crime.

> Here, we have a nice clear topic sentence that lets us know what the rest of the paragraph will cover. We now have a guide for the type of evidence we'll need.

> Now that we know what our paragraph is focusing on, we can better introduce the evidence and explain how it connects to the topic sentence.

> Lastly, we can analyze our evidence, link it back to the topic sentence, and then wrap up our paragraph concisely.