Reverse Outlining and Using the MEAL Plan to Revise

by the Walden Dissertation Editors

The MEAL plan is one of many ways to develop paragraphs. It is also a helpful tool to apply to existing drafts during revision. View the Revising and Self-Editing a Doctoral Capstone and Reviewing the Literature and Incorporating Previous Research webinars for more information.

Use this SMRTguide to analyze and revise a draft of the literature review, discussion and conclusions, and other sections or chapters in the doctoral capstone.

Reverse outlining

Many writers outline their drafts before they start writing, but successful revisers often outline what they have already written, too. This “reverse outlining” is like taking reading notes on one’s own work, and it is a helpful strategy for organizing and revising longer documents with many parts. For instance, reverse outlining a section may look like this:

The goal is to go back over each paragraph in a section and write a sentence that captures the main idea.
Steps to Reverse Outlining:

1. Write a sentence that summarizes each paragraph in a section.

2. Look over at the sentences; does the order make sense?
   a. Should the order be changed?

3. Do the sentences written capture the main idea?
   a. If not, are revisions needed?

4. Does each sentence that summarizes the paragraph match with the topic sentence of that paragraph?

5. Revise the material, change the order, split or combine paragraphs so that the outline that emerged makes sense, content-wise, and has a cohesive flow between ideas.

6. Also, double check to ensure that there are conclusion and transition sentences where needed; add if necessary.

7. This is also a great time to double check that your paragraph fits with the MEAL plan.
   a. The MEAL plan is not a requirement, but a strategy for writing effective paragraphs.

Reverse outlining is useful when revising to address faculty feedback, to meet program and degree requirements, and to refine synthesis of multiple themes, ideas, and sources.

See the next page for more on the MEAL plan.
Using the MEAL plan

The MEAL plan stands for **Main Idea**, **Evidence**, **Analysis**, and **Lead Out**. Go over the body paragraphs in the draft and identify each of these four elements in every paragraph.

- **Main idea**: Topic sentence that introduces and summarizes the main point of the paragraph. Usually does not include a citation.
- **Evidence**: Information from the literature. Includes citations.
- **Analysis**: Writer’s own interpretation/explanation of the evidence, synthesis, and addresses the *So what?* aspect. Tells the reader why the evidence is important and what it means.
- **Lead Out**: Transition to the next paragraph.

Sometimes, one or more of these elements will be missing, or the four elements will appear out of order. When this happens, consider what needs to be changed: Is there no clear main idea? Does the paragraph lack original analysis? Does the main idea appear toward the end? Is there no cited support for the facts or claims?

*(Note: Not every paragraph in a document may fit into the MEAL plan, such as introductions and conclusions or descriptions of procedure and analysis. This method is best for body paragraphs that incorporate evidence to put forward a main idea, especially in the literature review.)*

Contact editor@waldenu.edu with questions about preparing the proposal and final doctoral capstone document for submission.