

Writing Too Little or Too Much

Problem: You know what to write about and you know how to write, but you are having trouble making your essay the required length. You may not know where to add or subtract from your paper, you may not know how to determine how much you should write about each topic, or you may find that whenever you try to rewrite your paper, it comes out imbalanced (there's too much or too little on particular topics).

Use Reverse Outlining

*This section is largely adapted from the Purdue OWL at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/689/01/>

Reverse Outlining will help you A) identify where exactly you can expand or contract what you've already written, and/or B) begin to determine how much you should write about each topic. Reverse Outlining is a two-step process, and should be used for paragraphs *and* whole sections at a time.

1. In the *left-hand* margin, write down the topic of each paragraph/section. Try to use as few words as possible (aim for 5-10 words max).

These notes should tell you if each paragraph/section is focused and clear. If it isn't, and you think the paragraph might be made clearer by deleting or adding some content, here's your chance to lengthen or shorten the paper. Also, write down any new ideas you have that you think you *could* talk about.

2. In the *right-hand* margin, write down how the paragraph/section topic advances the overall argument of the text. Again, be brief.

This allows you to quickly see how each paragraph/section fits in the overall organization of your paper—or whether it does so at all. You may notice that A) the topics of each paragraph/section don't flow in a logical order, so the paragraphs should be re-ordered, or B) that you are spending too much time on a small sub-topic or too little time on an important topic.

If after finishing your **Reverse Outline** you still don't know how to make your essay the correct length, then you will need to do some more reorganizing and should proceed to the next phase.

Reorganizing pt. 1: Paragraph Counting

Paragraph Counting is a method to help you think about and plan the overall structure of your paper, including deciding where each topic should go and how long it should be. **Paragraph Counting** is not an exact science or a rigid format to follow, but rather a useful strategy that can give you a helpful framework on which to build your paper. It can be used before, while, and after you write.

A double-spaced paper using Times New Roman font contains roughly 250 words or two paragraphs of 5-7 sentences each. To make the calculations easier, we will assume that each paragraph has 3 pieces of evidence with analysis, a thesis that relates to the essay's overall thesis, and a conclusion. If you are given a minimum word count or page amount, simply convert that into how many equivalent paragraphs

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that would be. This will give you a rough idea as to how many paragraphs your essay will have to include. Generally, your introduction and conclusion paragraphs will not introduce ideas that you will have not already discussed in the body of the essay.

So, now you know that total amount of body paragraphs you will have to write= the total page length multiplied by 2 (because each page has roughly 2 paragraphs) minus 2 (the intro and conclusion paragraphs).

For example, if an essay needs to be 10 pages, you know this means there should be about 20 total paragraphs and 18 total body paragraphs. If an essay needs to be 3,000 words, that's equivalent to 12 pages (at 250 words per page), 24 total paragraphs, and 22 body paragraphs.

Reorganizing pt. 2: Bringing it all together

A) If you want to make your essay LONGER

Use **Paragraph Counting** to find the total number of paragraphs in a hypothetical essay of the length you are required to write. Now, calculate how many more paragraphs you'll need to write to reach that length. (For example, if you're 3 pages short, you'll need to write about 6 more paragraphs.) Go back to the notes you took for the **Reverse Outline** and find exactly where you felt you could expand or add a section, and simply identify a number of topics that matches the number you need (e.g. If you need 6 paragraphs, come up with 6 topics). If you did a good job with your **Reverse Outline**, this should be easy. If your **Reverse Outline** doesn't help, you at least know that you only need to come up with the number of topics that you calculated (e.g. 6).

B) If you want to make your essay SHORTER

Use **Paragraph Counting** to find the total number of paragraphs in a hypothetical essay of the length you are required to write. Now, calculate how many more paragraphs you'll need to subtract to reach that length. (For example, if you're 3 pages over, you'll need to get rid of about 6 paragraphs.) Go back to the notes you took for the **Reverse Outline** and find exactly where you felt you could reduce or delete a section, and simply the number of sections you could do this for that matches the number you need (e.g. If you need to reduce 6 paragraphs, identify 6 sections you could delete; though if you can only reduce parts of paragraphs, you may need to shoot for 10 or 11). If you did a good job with your **Reverse Outline**, this should be easy. If your **Reverse Outline** doesn't help, you at least know that you only need to identify the number of sections (give or take) that you calculated (e.g. 6-11).

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Writing Too Little or Too Much—Supplemental Handout

Use **Reverse Outlining** (example of paragraph #1)

| Topic | Paragraph | Function |
|--|---|--|
| <p>Researchers haven't been able to determine whether or not cell phones are more distracting to a driver than other things.</p> | <p>While the issue of driving while using a cell phone is apparent on city streets, researchers have found it difficult to trace a connection between the cell phone and the decrease in attention that it may cause. While distraction is often cited as a major cause of motor accidents, studies have not been able to differentiate between the cell phone as a distraction and the distraction caused by children, talk radio and various other stimuli. In <i>The Age of Distraction</i>, Roger Greenfield writes, "driving is a unique activity in that there are waves of unspecified distraction, a distraction-haze, if you will, coming at the driver at all times" (Greenfield 2008, 57). It also must be noted that cell phones are just one of many devices that present drivers with an increasingly complex stream of distraction - on-board navigation systems, digital temperature controls, for example - in addition to the devices creating auditory and visual distractions held and operated by other passengers. All of this stimulation creates an extremely distracting environment for drivers. Researchers, on the other hand, are baffled by the new onslaught of possible distractions.</p> | <p>Introduction for an essay; presents the main issue.</p> |

If you want to make your essay SHORTER

After paragraph #1 above, the author went on to write paragraph #2:

This "distraction-haze," as Greenfield calls it, is one reason why banning cell phones from in-use cars has not caught on nationwide. The other reason is, of course, the public outcry that would ensue if all 50 states banned cell phones, smart-phones, tablets and the like from moving vehicles. "Taxi Talking," a recent article published in *The New York Times*, details the disdain cab drivers feel for the current state law that prohibits cell phones, but allows on-ear blue-tooth devices. "If my blue-tooth was banned, too, I would have no way of getting through my shift. Most New Yorkers don't want to chit-chat with cabbies" (*New York Times*, March 29, 2009) one driver explained. As of July 15, 2011, a Gallop poll posted on its website found that 59% of all

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Americans wish to continue using cell phones no matter where they are and what they might be driving. “Is cell phone usage too much of a distraction while driving?” A whopping 63% of those polled answered “No.” The public would not be amenable to growing cell phone regulation especially given that there is little research that can pinpoint the cell phone as the culprit in the generalized distraction drivers face.

Here’s what to do next:

Now let’s bring some of the similar ideas between these 2 paragraphs together. Looking at our reverse outline, there is a topic common to both paragraphs: each emphasizes the fact that there are multiple distractions while driving. This topic is found in both paragraphs and can therefore be consolidated into a single paragraph. Have a look at the two paragraphs after the student combined these ideas:

While the issue of driving while using a cell phone is apparent on city streets, researchers have found it difficult to trace a connection between the cell phone and the decrease in attention that it may cause. In *The Age of Distraction*, Roger Greenfield writes, “driving is a unique activity in that there are waves of unspecified distraction, a distraction-haze, if you will, coming at the driver at all times” (Greenfield 2008, 57). This “distraction-haze,” as Greenfield calls it, is one reason why banning cell phones from in-use cars has not caught on nationwide. Taxi Talking,” a recent article published in *The New York Times*, details the disdain cab drivers feel for the current state law that prohibits cell phones, but allows on-ear blue-tooth devices. “If my blue-tooth was banned, too, I would have no way of getting through my shift. Most New Yorkers don’t want to chit-chat with cabbies” (*New York Times*, March 29, 2009) one driver explained. As of July 15, 2011, a Gallop poll posted on its website found that 59% of all Americans wish to continue using cell phones no matter where they are and what they might be driving. The public would not be amenable to growing cell phone regulation especially given that there is little research that can pinpoint the cell phone as the culprit in the generalized distraction driver’s face.

The topic of “multiple distractions while driving” is now being discussed only in one paragraph, rather than being spread across two paragraphs. But instead of making that topic the main focus, we’ve eliminated non-essential examples, and combined the shared topic with the topic of “public opinion on the multiple distractions while driving.” By doing this subtracting and combining, extraneous material is eliminated and the writing is made more concise.

If you want to make your essay LONGER

There are several ways to make a section longer. You might list more **examples**, give an **anecdote**, or **expand on a topic** already mentioned.

So, in the case of paragraphs #1 and 2, you might give more **examples** of kinds of distractions people have while driving. You could give an **anecdote**—a short narrative about an incident—about a person who does have many distractions while s/he drives. Finally, you might **expand on the topic** of how distractions affect driving.

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