What does it say? What does it do?
Using a Reverse Outline

What is a reverse outline?
If a regular outline is something you write before you draft out your paper, a reverse outline is something you do after you write a draft.

Why should I reverse outline?
The reverse outline can be an extremely useful tool for helping you see the big picture of your paper, and can be especially useful for papers in need of major reordering of paragraphs or papers filled with paragraphs that have too many ideas in them and therefore don’t hold together.

How do I make a reverse outline?
Go through the paper and number each paragraph. Then on a separate sheet of paper, write #1 and, for that paragraph, answer the following questions: What does this paragraph say? What does this paragraph do? Then, on the next line write #2 and answer the “what does it say?” and “what does it do?” questions for that paragraph. . . and so on. Go through the entire paper this way. When you have gone through the entire paper, you will have an outline giving you an overview the content and rhetorical function of your paper.

Then what?
Now look carefully at your overview, asking yourself the following questions:

- Are the paragraphs properly focused, or are there multiple main ideas competing for control of a single paragraph?
- Now that you’ve identified the main point of each paragraph, does the topic sentence reflect that point?
- Are some of those ideas in a paragraph extraneous, and should they therefore be deleted from the paper? Or do they simply need to be moved to a different part of the paper? (Many times you may find that a random idea tacked onto the end of, say, paragraph five really belongs in paragraph eleven where you fully develop that idea.)
- When you look at the outline as a whole, does the organization of the paper reflect what you promised in your introduction / thesis? If the answer is no, consider whether you need to revise the thesis or revise the organization of the paper.

Revised and adapted with thanks from advice originally authored by Rebecca Nowacek of Marquette University.