

# SSU Writing Center

Ruben Salazar 1008~1801 E. Cotati Ave. ~664-4401

## “Backwards” or Descriptive Outlines

Once you’ve written a draft of a project--particularly a long project like a thesis--it’s sometimes hard to know what you’ve done; you lose sight. To gain distance and perspective on what you’ve accomplished so far, write a “backwards” or descriptive outline of your draft. (Often people have been taught to write an outline before they compose a draft; the suggestion here is to do so after, hence “backwards.”)

Carefully look at each paragraph you’ve written and write down a sentence or two in some separate writing space--a clean sheet of paper, a clear screen on your computer--about **what this paragraph basically is doing and saying**. Do this for every paragraph, until you have one or two sentences for each, arranged in outline-form. The sentences should be entirely descriptive of how the paragraph is acting in and on the developing document, and each sentence should contain clear and appropriate verbs: “paragraph 1 describes...”; “paragraph 2 develops...”; “paragraph 3 enumerates...”; “paragraph 4 defines....”

Once you have a complete outline, ask these questions about each paragraph:

1. Is there one main topic or idea in most (if not all) paragraphs?
2. Were there any paragraphs you couldn’t easily write a sentence about? If so, look at those closely and be very open to revising them.
3. Are any of the paragraphs not serving the basic purpose of the document? Do any fly off on tangents or soften rather than sharpen the document’s focus? If so, cut ruthlessly.
4. Does the idea in any particular paragraph need more development, more data, more anything?
5. Is the paragraph logically connected to the ones before and after, and are the connections made clear with explicit transitions?
6. Comparing your sentence to the paragraph it describes, do you detect any muddle? Does the paragraph flow smoothly?

Now, looking at the whole outline, see if your organization is clear and sensible. Are you telling the story you want to tell? Is there a clear trajectory to the document? Does it articulate and support a single clear assertion? Would a different arrangement serve your purposes better? Should you switch the order of some points to heighten or diminish their impact? Does the arrangement feel balanced, graceful, and effective? And are you saying things you don’t need to say, or have you left any key points out?

**Now grab a new sheet of paper or open a new computer screen and start rewriting.**