Backwards Outlining

Why You Should Backwards Outline:
• Allows you to consider your essay from a bird’s eye view after having focused on the micro-level details while writing it.
• Great means of checking to make sure the overall structure of your essay flows well.
• Very helpful for revising your working thesis statement, working towards your conclusion, and assuring your analysis of the topic is layered in a meaningful manner.

When to Backwards Outline:
• You’re stuck in the middle of writing an essay and unsure what the next logical step is. Provides a sense of how your essay is progressing with a sense of the “big picture”.
• You’re done writing your essay, you’ve spent a ton of time choosing precisely the right words to use in each sentence, and now it’s time to reflect on the strength of the essay’s overall structure.

How to Backwards Outline:
1. Start by thinking of the outlining techniques you were taught long ago (that some people still use) when you begin to write a paper. This is just like that, only easier, because you’re using material you’ve already written to create it.

2. Next, consider your intro paragraph and, on a separate piece of paper, write out your working thesis statement.

3. Go through each body paragraph and summarize it in one to two sentences. (If it takes more than a couple sentences to do this, consider breaking up your paragraph.) Write these out in bullet points.

4. Finally, write out an abbreviated version of your conclusion: what is the main point you want to leave your reader with? It may help to synthesize if you ask yourself the question, “So what?”

5. Now you have a basic reproduction of your essay. Go through each paragraph and check that it
• Has a strong direct correlation to your thesis statement, or is required to explain in some facet of your thesis statement indirectly.
• Fits well where it is, or doesn’t interrupt a logical train of thought. Does its placement in your essay make sense? Does its placement there strengthen your essay?