Reverse Outlining: An Exercise for Taking Notes and Revising Your Work

Some assignments ask you to read and analyze complex information. In these cases, reverse outlining can help you distill the main ideas into short, clear statements. You may also use reverse outlining to revise your own work. Reverse outlining follows a two-step, repeatable process:

1. In the left-hand margin, write down the topic of each paragraph. Try to use as few words as possible.

When reading, these notes should work as quick references.
for future study or in-class discussion.

When revising your own work, these notes should tell you if each paragraph is focused and clear.

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

When reading, these notes allow you to follow the logic of the essay, making it easier for you to analyze or discuss later.

When revising your own work, these notes should tell you if each paragraph fits in the overall organization of your paper. You may also notice that paragraphs should be shifted after completing this step.

Be brief, particularly when rereading your own work. If you can't complete each step in 5-10 words, the paragraph may need to be altered. You should be able to summarize the topic and the manner of support quickly; if you can't, revise the paragraph until you can.

This exercise can be expanded into an actual outline by rewriting/typing your notes, but writing in the margin might be sufficient.