Critical scholarship has yet not reached consensus on the structure of the book of Revelation. Two outlines of the book widely cited in current literature are those proposed by Adela Yarbro Collins and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Collins is the most prominent contemporary exponent of a septenary or seven-fold structure. Her outline is as follows:¹

1. Prologue 1:1-8
2. The seven messages 1:9-3:22
3. The seven seals 4:1-8:5
4. The seven trumpets 8:2-11:19
5. Seven unnumbered visions 12:1-15:4
6. The seven bowls 15:1-16:21
   Babylon appendix 17:1-19:10
7. Seven unnumbered visions 19:11-21:8
   Jerusalem appendix 21:9-22:5
8. Epilogue 22:6-21

Schüssler Fiorenza, by contrast, sees a chiastic structure in the book.²

A    Prologue 1:1-8
B    Inaugural vision and letter septet 1:9-3:22
C    Seven-sealed scroll vision 4:1-9:21; 11:15-19
D    Small prophetic scroll 10:1-15:4
C'   Seven-sealed scroll vision, continued 15:1,5-19:10
B'   Visions of judgment and salvation 19:11-22:9
A'   Epilogue 22:10-22:21

But these two outlines do not have the field to themselves, by any means. W. R. Kempson has done an exhaustive survey of proposals

regarding Revelation’s structure and has reached the somewhat pessimistic conclusion that there are almost as many proposed outlines as there are commentators on Revelation. “Each interpreter brings to the study [of the book’s literary structure] a unique set of personal stylistic presuppositional factors,” he writes, “which find expression in the ultimate outline [they suggest for] the book.”

Despite this multiplicity of outlines, however, Kempson finds that Revelation’s interpreters may be divided into two rough groupings. The first consists of those who take “external approaches” to its structure, seeing this determined by “some factor or group of factors outside the book.” These include Greek drama, the imperial games, early Christian paschal liturgy, etc. Those who take “internal approaches,” by contrast, “deal more specifically with the inner construction of the work.” These commentators derive their outlines from key phrases thought to signal new sections; a verse such as 1:19 which might imply an outline; the number seven, so prominent in the book (the “septenary approach”); and so on.

Kempson finds some praiseworthy insight but also grave shortcomings in each of the approaches he considers and concludes, therefore, that “a fresh attempt” is needed. He does, however, take “into account the positive contributions of previously suggested outlines.” He combines a double “key phrase” approach (“in the Spirit,” “sign”) with the “septenary” approach and a consideration of “major thematic elements” in the book to yield an elaborate outline in which Revelation is divided into four visions, the second constituting most of the book (chs. 4-16):

PROLOGUE 1:1-8
VISION I 1:9-3:22
VISION II 4:1-16:21
   A. Introduction: Revealing Heaven’s Purpose 4:2-5:14
   B. The Scroll Unsealed (7 Seals) 6:1-8:1
   C. The Scroll Heralded and Summarized (7 Trumpets) 8:2-11:19
   D. The Scroll Opened and Executed (3 Signs)
      1. & 2. The Woman and the Dragon 12:1-14:20
      3. The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath 15:1-16:21

4 Kempson, Theology, p. 45.
5 Kempson, Theology, p. 72.
6 Kempson, Theology, pp. 95-142.