

Coherence: Transitions

The most convincing ideas in the world, expressed in the most beautiful sentences, will move no one unless those ideas are properly connected. Unless readers can move easily from one thought to another, they will surely find something else to read or turn on the television.

Providing transitions between ideas is largely a matter of attitude. You must never assume that your readers know what you know. In fact, it's a good idea to assume not only that your readers need all the information that you have and need to know how you arrived at the point you're at, but also that they are not quite as quick as you are. You might be able to leap from one side of the stream to the other; believe that your readers need some stepping stones and be sure to place them in readily accessible and visible spots.

There are four basic mechanical considerations in providing transitions between ideas: using transitional expressions, repeating key words and phrases, using pronoun reference, and using parallel form.

Using Transitional Tags

Transitional tags run the gamut from the most simple — the little conjunctions: and, but, nor, for, yet, or, (and sometimes) so — to more complex signals that ideas are somehow connected — the conjunctive adverbs and transitional expressions such as however, moreover, nevertheless, on the other hand.

The use of the little conjunctions — especially and and but — comes naturally for most writers. However, the question whether one can begin a sentence with a small conjunction often arises. Isn't the conjunction at the beginning of the sentence a sign that the sentence should have been connected to the prior sentence? Well, sometimes, yes. But often the initial conjunction calls attention to the sentence in an effective way, and that's just what you want.

Over-used, beginning a sentence with a conjunction can be distracting, but the device can add a refreshing dash to a sentence and speed the narrative flow of your text. Restrictions against beginning a sentence with and or but are based on shaky grammatical foundations; some of the most influential writers in the language have been happily ignoring such restrictions for centuries.*

A word of caution: Do not interlard your text with transitional expressions merely because you know these devices connect ideas. They must appear, naturally, where they belong, or they'll stick like a fishbone in your reader's craw. (For that same reason, there is no point in trying to memorize this vast list.) On the other hand, if you can read your entire essay and discover none of these transitional devices, then you must wonder what, if anything, is holding your ideas together. Practice by inserting a tentative however, nevertheless, consequently. Reread the essay later to see if these words provide the glue you needed at those points.

Repetition of Key Words and Phrases

The ability to connect ideas by means of repetition of key words and phrases sometimes meets a natural resistance based on the fear of being repetitive. We've been trained to loathe redundancy. Now we must learn that catching a word or phrase that's important to a reader's comprehension of a piece and replaying that word or phrase creates a musical motif in that reader's head. Unless it is overworked and obtrusive, repetition lends itself to a sense of coherence (or at least to the illusion of coherence). Remember Lincoln's advice:

You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.

In fact, you can't forget Lincoln's advice, because it has become part of the music of our language.

Remember to use this device to link paragraphs as well as sentences.

Pronoun Reference

Pronouns quite naturally connect ideas because pronouns almost always refer the reader to something earlier in the text. I cannot say "This is true because . . ." without causing the reader to consider what "this" could mean. Thus, the pronoun

causes the reader to sum up, quickly and subconsciously, what was said before (what this is) before going on to the because part of my reasoning.

We should hardly need to add, however, that it must always be perfectly clear what a pronoun refers to. If my reader cannot instantly know what this is, then my sentence is ambiguous and misleading. Also, do not rely on unclear pronoun references to avoid responsibility: "They say that . . ."

Parallelism

Music in prose is often the result of parallelism, the deliberate repetition of larger structures of phrases, even clauses and whole sentences. We urge you to read the Guide's section on Parallelism and take the accompanying quiz on recognizing parallel form (and repairing sentences that ought to use parallel form but don't). Pay special attention to the guided tour through the parallel intricacies within Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

Coherence Devices in Action

In our section on writing the Argumentative Essay, we have a complete student essay ("Cry, Wolf" — at the bottom of that document) which we have analyzed in terms of argumentative development and in which we have paid special attention to the connective devices holding ideas together.

Look at the following paragraph:

The ancient Egyptians were masters of preserving dead people's bodies by making mummies of them. Mummies several thousand years old have been discovered nearly intact. The skin, hair, teeth, fingernails and toenails, and facial features of the mummies were evident. It is possible to diagnose the disease they suffered in life, such as smallpox, arthritis, and nutritional deficiencies. The process was remarkably effective. Sometimes apparent were the fatal afflictions of the dead people: a middle-aged king died from a blow on the head, and polio killed a child king. Mummification consisted of removing the internal organs, applying natural preservatives inside and out, and then wrapping the body in layers of bandages.

Though weak, this paragraph is not a total washout. It starts with a topic sentence, and the sentences that follow are clearly related to the topic sentence. In the language of writing, the paragraph is unified (i.e., it contains no irrelevant details). However, the paragraph is not coherent. The sentences are disconnected from each other, making it difficult for the reader to follow the writer's train of thought.

Below is the same paragraph revised for coherence. *Italics* indicates pronouns and repeated/restated key words, **bold** indicates transitional tag-words, and underlining indicates parallel structures.

The ancient Egyptians were masters of preserving dead people's bodies by making mummies of them. In short, mummification consisted of removing the internal organs, applying natural preservatives inside and out, and then wrapping the body in layers of bandages. **And** the process was remarkably effective. Indeed, mummies several thousand years old have been discovered nearly intact. *Their* skin, hair, teeth, fingernails and toenails, and facial features are still evident. *Their* diseases in life, such as smallpox, arthritis, and nutritional deficiencies, are still diagnosable. Even their fatal afflictions are still apparent: a middle-aged king died from a blow on the head; a child king died from polio. The paragraph is now much more coherent. The organization of the information and the links between sentences help readers move easily from one sentence to the next. Notice how this writer uses a variety of coherence devices, sometimes in combination, to achieve overall paragraph coherence.

*Authority: The New Fowler's Modern English Usage edited by R.W. Burchfield. Clarendon Press: Oxford, England. 1996. Used with the permission of Oxford University Press.