

Coherence in Paragraphs

It is not enough to speak of unity and organization in paragraphs unless one also talks about coherence. The reader, that is, must be able to follow your train of thought. Coherence is achieved largely by means of transitions and repetition.

Transitions

Richard Wagner, commenting on his work as a composer of operas, once said "The art of composition is the art of transition," for his art moved from note to note, measure to measure, scene to scene. Because transitions establish connections between points, they contribute to coherence. Here are some of the most common transitional words and phrases.

1. amplification or likeness: *similarly, likewise, and, also, again, second, third, in addition, furthermore, moreover, finally*
2. emphasis: *chiefly, equally, indeed, even more important*
3. contrast or concession: *but, on the contrary, on the other hand, by contrast, of course, however, still, doubtless, no doubt, nevertheless, granted that, conversely, although, admittedly*
4. example: *for example, for instance, as an example, specifically, consider as an illustration, that is, such as, like*
5. consequence or cause and effect: *thus, so, then, it follows, as a result, therefore, hence*
6. restatement: *In short, that is, in effect, in other words*
7. place: *in the foreground, further back, in the distance*
8. time: *afterward, next, then, as soon as, later, until, when, finally, last, at last*
9. conclusion: *finally, therefore, thus, to sum up*

Make sure that each sentence in a paragraph is properly related to the preceding and the following sentences. Such obvious transitions or roadsigns as "moreover," "however," "but," "for example," "this tendency," "in the next chapter" are useful, but remember that (1) these transitions should not start every sentence (they can be buried: "Smith, moreover..."), and (2) explicit transitions need not appear at all in a sentence, so long as the argument proceeds clearly. The gist of a paragraph might run thus: "Speaking broadly, there were two comic traditions.... The first.... The second.... The chief difference between them.... But both traditions...."

Consider the following paragraph:

Folklorists are just beginning to look at Africa. A great quantity of folklore materials has been gathered from African countries in the past century and published by missionaries, travelers, administrators, linguists, and anthropologists incidentally to their main pursuits. No fieldworker has devoted himself exclusively or even largely to the recording and analysis of folklore materials, according to a committee of the African Studies Association reporting in 1966 on the state of research in the African arts. Yet Africa is the continent supreme for traditional cultures that nurture folklore. Why this neglect?

The reader gets the point, but the second sentence seems to contradict the first: the first sentence tells us that folklorists are just beginning to look at Africa, but the next tells us that lots of folklore has been collected. An "although" between these sentences would clarify the author's point, especially if the third sentence were hooked on to the second, thus:

Folklorists are just beginning to look at Africa. Although a great quantity of folklore materials has been gathered from African countries in the past century by missionaries, travelers, administrators, linguists, and anthropologists incidentally to their main pursuits, no fieldworker has devoted himself....

But this revision gives us an uncomfortably long second sentence. Further revision would help. The real point of the original passage, though it is smothered, is that although many people have incidentally collected folklore materials in Africa, professional folklorists have not been active there. The contrast ought to be sharpened:

Folklorists are just beginning to look at Africa. True, missionaries, travelers, administrators, linguists, and anthropologists have collected a quantity of folklore materials incidentally to their main pursuits, but folklorists have lagged behind. No fieldworker....

In this revision the words that clarify are, of course, the small but important words "true" and "but." The original paragraph is a jigsaw puzzle, missing some tiny but necessary pieces.

Repetition

Coherence is achieved not only by means of transitional words and phrases but also through the repetition of key words. When you repeat key words or phrases, or when you provide clear substitutes (such as pronouns and demonstrative adjectives), you are helping the reader to keep step with your developing thoughts. Grammatical constructions too can be repeated, the repetitions or parallels linking the sentences or ideas.

The purpose of science is to describe the world in an orderly scheme or language which will help us to look ahead. We want to forecast what we can of the future behavior of the world; particularly we want to forecast how it would behave under several alternative actions of our own between which we are usually trying to choose. This is a very limited purpose. It has nothing whatever to do with bold generalizations about the universal workings of cause and effect. It has nothing to do with cause and effect at all, or with any other special mechanism. Nothing in this purpose, which is to order the world as an aid to decision and action, implies that the order must be of one kind rather than another. The order is what we find to work, conveniently and instructively. It is not something we stipulate; it is not something we can dogmatize about. It is what we find; it is what we find useful.

Notice the repetition of key words: "purpose," "orderly" ("order"), "world," "behavior" ("behave"), "actions" ("action"), "cause and effect." Notice also the repeated constructions: "we want to forecast," "it has nothing to do with," "it is not something we," "it is what we find."

In the next example the repetitions are less emphatic, but again they provide continuity.

Sir Kenneth Clark's *The Nude* is an important book; and, luckily, it is also most readable; but it is not a bedside book. Each sentence needs attention because each sentence is relevant to the whole, and the incorrigible skipper will sometimes find

himself obliged to turn back several pages, chapters even, in order to pick up the thread of the argument. Does this sound stiff? The book is not stiff because it is delightfully written. Let the student have no fears; he is not going to be bored for a moment while he reads these 400 pages; he is going to be excited, amused, instructed, provoked, charmed, irritated and surprised.

Notice not only the exact repetitions ("each sentence," "stiff") but also the slight variations, such as "an important book," "not a bedside book"; "he is not going," "he is going," and the emphatic list of participles ("excited, amused, instructed," and so on) at the conclusion.

Transitions between Paragraphs

As you move from one paragraph to the next—from one step in the development of your thesis to the next—you probably can keep the reader with you if you make the first sentence of each new paragraph a transition, or perhaps a transition and a topic sentence. The first sentence of a paragraph that could follow the paragraph quoted a moment ago on Kenneth Clark's *The Nude* might run thus:

Among the chief delights of these 400 pages are the illustrations.

Clearly "Among the chief delights of these 400 pages" is a transition, picking up the reference to "400 pages" near the end of the previous paragraph, and the rest of the sentence introduces the topic—the illustrations—of the new paragraph. Only if your two paragraphs are extremely complex, and you believe the reader needs lots of help, will you need to devote an entire paragraph to a transition between two other paragraphs. Often a single transitional word or phrase will suffice.

Paragraph Length

Of course, hard-and-fast rules cannot be made about the lengths of paragraphs, but more often than not a good paragraph is between one hundred and two hundred words, consisting of more than one or two but fewer than eight or ten sentences. It is not a matter, however, of counting words or sentences; paragraphs are coherent blocks, substantial units of your essay, and the spaces between them are brief resting places allowing the reader to take in what you have said. One page of typing (approximately 250 words) is about as much as the reader can take before requiring a slight break. On the other hand, one page of typing with half a dozen paragraphs is probably faulty because the reader is too often interrupted with needless pauses and because the page has too few *developed* ideas: an assertion is made, and then another, and another. They are unconvincing because they are not supported with detail. To put it another way, a paragraph is a room in the house you are building. If your essay is some five hundred words long, you probably will not break it down into more than four or five rooms or paragraphs; if you break it down into a dozen paragraphs, the reader will feel he is touring a rabbit warren rather than a house.

The Use and Abuse of Short Paragraphs

A short paragraph can be effective when it summarizes a highly detailed previous paragraph or group of paragraphs, or when it serves as a transition between two complicated paragraphs, but unless you are sure that the reader needs a break, avoid thin paragraphs. A paragraph that is nothing but a transition can usually be altered into a transitional phrase or clause or sentence that starts the next paragraph.