

## Improving Paragraph Coherence

### UWF Writing Lab

Once you are satisfied that the parts of the paragraph form a unified whole, you can push further toward creating a polished paragraph by testing their coherence, how well they stick together. Coherence is the logical transition between the parts inside the paragraph. This connection springs both from content (the parts you choose and the way you arrange them) and from the use of various mechanical devices. Coherence is necessary. Unity without coherence results in a second-class paragraph.

**Coherence through subordination and coordination.** One of the easiest ways to form a coherent link between sentences within a paragraph is through coordination and subordination. All sentences are, of course, subordinate to the topic sentence. Subordination shows how some thoughts are secondary to others while coordination shows how thoughts are equal. The balancing of ideas in a varied, rhythmic pattern provides a smooth flow from sentence to sentence within a paragraph. Without careful subordination and coordination, the paragraph sometimes dwindles to a list of simple sentences or a series of compounds bumping one into the next. These few sentences illustrate the jagged effect of that unrelieved sentence pattern:

Amtrak is a huge train system. It is languishing. It is large. Perhaps it is as large as some of the great systems in the history of rail passenger service. The company is floundering.

Varied coordination and subordination would help that passage read more smoothly:

Amtrak is a huge but languishing train system. It is large, perhaps as large as some of the great systems in the history of rail passenger service, but despite its scope, the company is floundering.

**Coherence through tense and pronoun agreement.** Another way to gain coherence is to keep verb tenses and pronoun number consistent within the paragraph. Blatant shifts in time or person startle your reader. If you begin a discussion in the present tense, do not jump to the past tense in the next sentence. These two sentences show the confusion caused by shifting tenses:

Cold and alone, he turned on the gas stove. He dies in his sleep.

The shift in tense within the description immediately confuses the time intended. You want all the parts to cohere, to make sense, as they pass from one to the next. Mixed pronouns create the same problem. Unless you are careful, you may find yourself shifting back and forth between singular and plural or between first, second, and third person pronouns. A reader can get into quite a muddle about just who is doing something if you begin with “I,” slip next to “you,” and switch over to “he” or “she.” Notice how such a shift occurs in this example:

Legally, as doctors and nurses, we must do what we can to extend life. Life must be extended even if you prolong suffering.

Sometimes both problems occur in the same passage:

Upon entering the rickety beach house, you had to play hopscotch to avoid falling through the rotting floorboards. Going to the old-fashioned kitchen sink is a delight since you could get a taste-tempting treat of all the salted, rusty water one could drink. After a refreshing dip in the ocean, you can drag your sand-covered body to the mildewed shower stall.

Try to be consistent. If you want to tell a story in past tense, stick with past tense. If you want to discuss a situation with third person, use third person regularly; don't shift back and forth to second.

**Coherence through transitional words and phrases.** A common way to link parts of a whole is to use transitional markers to help one sentence glide into another. Words such as “in addition,” “however,” “moreover,” “although,” and “first/second/third” pull related thoughts more tightly together and show their relationship more clearly. Two versions of the passage below show the value of transitional devices in forming a tighter relationship between sentences:

In the mid-1970's the Minnesota Vikings were a very well-built team because of the draft and some big trades. In 1973, the Vikings acquired Fran Tarkenton from the New York Giants, and they picked Chuck Foreman through the college draft. The Vikings were probably the most evenly balanced team in professional football at that time.

This series of largely simple sentences is too stiffly arranged. With a little subordination and some transition, it will read more smoothly:

In the mid-1970's, the Minnesota Vikings were a very well-built team because of the draft and some big trades. For example, they picked up players like Chuck Foreman through the college draft. But perhaps more importantly, they pulled off some coups, like the Tarkenton trade in 1973. Undoubtedly, the Vikings were the most evenly balanced team in professional football in the mid-1970's.

**Coherence through the repetition of key words.** Repeating words important to the sense of a paragraph's message also helps coherence. Such repetition emphasizes a word, weaving it through several sentences to tie them together internally. Sometimes, however, repetition becomes boring and monotonous. Do not allow the repeated words to dominate so as to become irritants. Such is the problem in this passage in which a student discussed a collection of old trains he had sold. Midway through the paragraph he wrote:

I had a freight set, slightly more common than the passenger set but still worth about \$250 for the whole set. The freight set consisted of five freight cars. A Hudson steam locomotive completed the set.

Such repetition adds nothing to the sense of the paragraph; rather than pulling thoughts together more effectively, the repeating of “freight” and “set” seem clumsily echoed. A simple revision would be.

I had a freight set, slightly more common than the passenger train but still worth about \$250. It had five freight cars and a Hudson steam locomotive.

**Coherence through parallel structure.** Parallel structure can also serve as a transitional device. Whole sentences sometimes reflect parallel structure to endow a paragraph with a rhythmic transition from one thought to another or minor support to major support. For example:

We all sat quietly enjoying the evening. Ian was writing a book. I was reading one. And Jerry was working on the income tax.

Repeating the subject/verb pattern in the three explanatory sentences arranges an internal transition which is subtle but definite.