

Chapter 5: Coherence

Coherence has to do with the way in which information presented in a paper is organized to move the reader as effortlessly as possible from beginning to end. Coherent writing is easier to read because the ideas flow seamlessly from one to another. It is achieved through organizational structure, paragraph unity, and sentence cohesion.

Organizational Structure

Organizational structure refers to the order of presentation. Poor structure equates to poor writing, regardless of the importance or relevance of the topic (see Chapter 3). Authors should use their outlines or informal plans to organize their papers initially. As they develop their material, if more logical or effective approaches are discovered, authors can modify their original plans to improve coherence.

Paragraph Unity

Paragraph unity is achieved by structuring paragraphs to ensure that each has only one main idea, usually stated in a topic sentence. That topic sentence is followed by specific details. In writing paragraphs, authors may organize their material based on one of several patterns. The following list of patterns is by no means exhaustive:

- **Topic Chain:** Each sentence includes the topic words or pronouns representing the topic (Boise State University Writing Center, 1999).
- **Known–New:** Each sentence begins with information known to the reader (even if it is from the preceding sentences) and then introduces the next piece of new information (Boise State University Writing Center, 1999).
- **Parallel:** Key phrases or sentences with similar meaning and grammatical structure are repeated to create rhythm and emphasis. This pattern may also include the repetition of the same word or phrase throughout the paragraph for emphasis (Sebranek, Meyer, & Kemper, 1997).
- **Chronology:** Details are presented according to their order in real time (Hodges, Homer, Webb, & Miller, 1994).
- **Order of Importance:** Details are presented either from least important to most important or vice versa, depending on the relationship of the paragraph to the next paragraph or section (Hodges et al., 1994).
- **General to Specific (Deductive):** The most general statement is given first. Each succeeding sentence contains more and more specific information (Hodges et al., 1994).
- **Specific to General (Inductive):** The most specific information is given first, building to the general statement at the end of the paragraph (Hodges et al., 1994).

- Topic–Restriction–Illustration: The general topic is given in the topic sentence. The topic is then narrowed or restricted in the next sentence or two. The author then explains the restricted topic, providing details, examples, or illustrations (Hodges et al., 1994).
- Question–Answer: A question is proposed and answered through the supporting details (Hodges et al., 1994).
- Problem–Solution: The problem is stated. The solution is given through the supporting details (Hodges et al., 1994).
- Cause–Effect: The supporting material forms an explanation for the occurrence of something (Bates, 2000).
- Sequence: A process is detailed step-by-step (Bates, 2000).

Authors may also combine patterns appropriately to create the best flow for a work.

Sentence Cohesion

Sentence cohesion refers to the linking of one sentence to the next sentence in a paragraph (Kies, 2011). Authors may use several techniques to achieve sentence cohesion, including the organizational pattern chosen (see previous section).

Transition Words and Phrases

Discussed earlier in terms of the movement from one paragraph to another in a work, transition words and phrases may be used to link one sentence to the next within a paragraph.

Parallelism (Parallel Construction)

According to Strunk and White, “This principle, that of parallel construction, requires that expressions similar in content and function be outwardly similar” (Strunk & White, 2000, p. 26). Parallelism is the intentional use of equal grammatical constructions within a sentence or paragraph to improve flow and to emphasize the relationship between the ideas or elements (words, phrases, clauses, or sentences). Because these expressions must be equal grammatically, authors should pair nouns with nouns, verbs with verbs, adjectives with adjectives, prepositional phrases with prepositional phrases, and so on.

Note the various parallel structures in the Gettysburg Address, given by Lincoln in 1863 (*Gettysburg Address*, 2010; bold and italics added):

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, **conceived in liberty**, and **dedicated to the proposition** that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether **that nation**, or **any nation**, **so conceived** and **so dedicated**, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We

have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, **we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow** this ground. The brave men, **living and dead**, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. **The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.** It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve **that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.**

Note also the use of the parallel structures within parallel structures (italicized wording).

Authors should be careful to avoid faulty parallelism, which occurs when authors pair expressions that are not similar in construction or try to add variety to their sentence construction, inadvertently connecting dissimilar elements.

Faulty: *We went to the mountains last spring and in the summer.* (connecting a word and a phrase)

Correct: *We went to the mountains last spring and last summer.*

Faulty: *Mom gave us a choice of ham, cheese, turkey, and a movie.* (connecting food and entertainment; the two are not equal in thought)

Correct: *Mom gave us choices of ham, cheese, and turkey for lunch and of three movies for entertainment.*

Faulty: *We traveled by train, while my cousin drove to the reunion.* (connecting two independent clauses that are not constructed in the same way)

Correct: *We traveled by train to the reunion, while my cousin traveled by car.*

Repetition

Repeating a key word from one sentence to the next or throughout a paragraph lets readers see connections. However, using the same word too frequently may be monotonous. To avoid such monotony, authors may use different forms of the word (i.e., *monotonous*, *monotony*), replace a noun with its equivalent pronoun (be sure the antecedent is clear), or use a synonym.

In the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln repeats clauses (*we cannot*), subordinating conjunctions in parallel clauses (*that*), objects of parallel prepositional phrases (*the people*), adverbs (*so*), and nouns (*nation*).

Enumeration

Adding the element of numerical order is one of the more common strategies to create coherence. In developing this chronological or sequential paragraph pattern, authors should be consistent in the type of marker they use within the sequence (i.e., if introductory words are used, do not shift to phrases). However, different markers may be used to denote different sequences. For example, if a process contains three steps, each step may be marked by an introductory word (e.g., *first, second, third*). If Step 3 contains four parts, the author may mark that sequence with letters placed in parentheses.

Introductory Words or Phrases

Words (e.g., *first, second, third, etc.*) or phrases (e.g., *in the first place, in the second place, etc.*) may be used to show the sequence of the information being presented. Note that each item should be parallel in grammatical construction. Also, authors should be consistent in the word form used (i.e., use *first, second, third, not in the first place, second, third*). NOTE: Use of *-ly* versions of these numbers (i.e., *firstly, secondly, etc.*) should not be used (Strunk & White, 2000).

Letters or Numbers

Authors should consult their style guides (see Chapter 12: Formatting) to determine the appropriate way to enumerate sequences or lists. Some guides specify the use of numbers for lists constructed as separate paragraphs and of letters for enumerated series within sentences. Other guides require only consistency in the use of either letters or numbers. Again, authors should ensure that all elements in the list or series are parallel in form.

Common Problems with Cohesion

Problems in cohesion may occur as the result of inconsistencies in the writing. These inconsistencies or shifts usually involve tense, tone, voice, person, number, style, or viewpoint. The shifts may cause readers to miss key points because the connections between the ideas are not clear.

Tense

Authors should consult their style guides for specifics. Some guides specify the use of past tense when conveying certain types of information, for example, when referring to a source. Others make no reference to a preferred tense. The key is to determine the required or appropriate tense and then consistently apply it except when it is illogical to do so. Unnecessary shifts in verb tense may confuse the reader.

Tone

Tone refers to the overall feeling or effect authors create in their works: serious, humorous, satiric, solemn, and so on. A shift in tone may confuse the reader as to the intent of the author.

Voice

Voice refers to whether the subject of a sentence is doing or receiving the action. Sentences may be written in either active (e.g., *I ate the pie*) or passive voice (e.g., *the pie was eaten by the children*). Generally, authors should use active voice.

However, there are times when the passive is preferred, either to emphasize the role of the receiver or to minimize the role of the doer. In writing about methodology, for example, authors should emphasize the receivers of the action not the researchers who set up the study (see Chapter 9: Sentence Sense).

Person

Person refers to the individual being referred to. In first person (i.e., *I, we*), the narrator (fiction) or author (nonfiction) is referred to. In second person (i.e., *you*), the reader is being referred to. In third person (i.e., *he, she, they*), other individuals are being referred to.

Traditionally, in scholastic and academic writing, authors have been expected to refrain from using first or second person. However, that taboo is no longer consistently enforced because of its artificiality. Both the Modern Language Association (MLA; 2008) and the American Psychological Association (APA; 2010) permit the use of first person to refer to the author of the work. Other guides, especially guides prepared by universities for dissertation and thesis style and formatting, still mandate the use of third person only. The only way to know which use is permitted is to consult the specific style guide.

Nevertheless, shifts in person within a paper should be avoided. Common shifts include the following:

- Second person to third person: *You should buy the records because one needs all the data one can get.*
- Third person to second person: *As authors, you should develop the habit of writing daily to hone your craft. (Authors is third person even though it is not a pronoun.)*

Number

Number refers to singular and plural forms of nouns, pronouns, and verbs. Often, problems occur when authors try to eliminate gender bias in language. They replace gender-specific singular pronouns (i.e., *he, she*) with nouns but then use plural possessive pronouns (i.e., *their*).

- Incorrect: *The secretary should bring their calendar to the meeting to aid in scheduling follow-up meetings.*
- Correct: *Secretaries should bring their calendars to meetings to aid in scheduling follow-up meetings.*

Problems with number may also occur when authors use collective nouns, nouns that may be either singular or plural depending on the context. In the incorrect example, the collective noun *committee* is used in the singular sense, but the possessive pronoun is in the plural form.

Incorrect: *The committee gave their report to the full membership.*

Correct: *The committee gave its report to the full membership.*