

Paragraph Cohesion And Coherence

Essays are comprised of paragraphs that support the thesis statement of that essay. Cohesive paragraphs flow easily from sentence to sentence, while coherent paragraphs clearly develop one topic in a logical manner. A paragraph can be cohesive without being coherent and *vice versa*. In other words, sentences can move easily from one to the next in one paragraph but make no sense as a whole, while another paragraph may perfectly develop its topic while being choppy and difficult to read.

How to achieve cohesion, the structural glue that binds sentences together.

1. **Start new sentences in your paragraphs with information discussed in the previous sentences.** This allows the reader to easily contextualize familiar information in relation to new information. Compare Example A to Example B:
 - A. *An introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion are all **components** of a typical essay.*
A strong thesis statement ties these three components together.
 - B. *An introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion are all **components** of a typical essay.*
These components/parts are tied together by a strong thesis statement. *

In Example A, placing **components** near the end of the second sentence may leave the reader wondering how a **thesis statement** relates to the previous sentence. In Example B, however, the word **components** (its synonym **parts** could also have been used) is repeated at the start of the second sentence, making the meaning of that sentence clear to the reader. The two sentences are glued together structurally and easier to read.

*Note that the passive voice is used in Example B. Williams and Bizup (2014) argue that a strong role of the passive voice is “to arrange sentences so that they flow from one to the next easily.”¹

2. **Employ transition signals when needed.** Transition signals are like highway signs that direct the reader to quickly understand the relationship between adjoining sentences. When your writing changes direction, you should alert the reader. Compare Examples A and B to Examples C and D:
 - A. *In October, the days are bright and sunny. They can be surprisingly cold.*
 - B. *On Mondays, my classes start at 8:20 am. I go to sleep by 11 the night before.*
 - C. *In October, the days are bright and sunny. **However**, they can be surprisingly cold.*
 - D. *On Mondays, my classes start at 8:20 am, **so** I go to sleep by 11 the night before.*

The sentences in A and B change directions abruptly, leaving the reader wondering how the second sentence is related to the first. In contrast, the transition signals in C and D alert the reader that a contrast (**however**) and a result (**so**) are coming. (See BU Writing Centre *Establishing Strong Connections* handout.)

How to achieve coherence, a paragraph acting as a unit of meaning.

1. **Start your paragraph with a clear topic sentence that is developed throughout.** If your topic sentence lacks clarity, your paragraph will lack focus.
2. **Tie the subjects of the supporting sentences to the theme of the topic sentence.** If the subjects are not all related to the topic, you are likely straying from the focus of the paragraph, which will then lack unity.
3. **Repeat keywords or synonyms from the topic sentence throughout the paragraph.** For example, Example A uses the pronoun *it* to refer to the **Statue of Liberty** twice. The continued use of pronouns may cause the reader to forget what the pronoun *it* refers to:
 - A. *The **Statue of Liberty** was a welcoming symbol to immigrants entering the United States. It was a gift from France dedicated in New York harbor in 1886, my grandmother's birthyear. Sixteen years later, it greeted my Babka as she entered US territory for the first time.*
 - In Example B, the pronouns are replaced with synonyms for the Statue of Liberty, removing any confusion about the theme of the sentences. All pronouns in a paragraph need not be removed, but those more than one sentence away from the reference noun/antecedent should be replaced.
 - B. *The **Statue of Liberty** was a welcoming symbol to immigrants entering the United States. The **colossal statue** was a gift from France dedicated in New York harbor in 1886, my grandmother's birthyear. Sixteen years later, the **Lady of Liberty** greeted my Babka as she entered US territory for the first time.*
4. **Use consistent pronouns and reference them correctly.**
 - A. For example, make sure that you don't switch pronouns/points of view within a text:
***The students** are always late for class; ~~you~~ **they** should arrive at least five minutes early.*
(The personal pronoun **you** is changed to the impersonal pronoun **they** to reference **students** in general.)
 - B. In addition, the pronoun must be the same person and number as its antecedent, the noun that proceeds it:
*The **engine** of a car is ~~his~~ **its** most important part.* (The possessive pronoun **his** incorrectly references its antecedent, **engine**, that is neither male nor female. Therefore, the pronoun is changed to **its**, the gender-neutral singular pronoun.)
5. **Follow a logical progression of ideas in each paragraph.**
 - A. *Chronological* – when events are sequenced as a function of time. This type of sequencing works well for process essays, historical essays, and narratives.
 - B. *Logical division of ideas* – when a topic is divided into numerous parts, and each is discussed separately. This type of sequencing works for multi-faceted topic sentences.
 - C. *From general to specific ideas* – how introductory paragraphs are generally sequenced
 - D. *From problem to solution* – with the problem found in the topic sentence and the solution/solutions discussed in the supporting sentence

¹Williams, J.M. & Bizup, J. (2014). *Style lessons in clarity and grace* (11th ed., p. 69). Pearson Education.

