

## COHERENCE AND FLOW: FROM OLD TO NEW INFORMATION

Malena Rice, Elizabeth White, and Josie Bircher

Some of the most important factors in determining whether a piece of writing will be successfully interpreted and understood by a reader are a piece of writing's coherence and cohesion.

**Coherence** refers to the logical connection between ideas and is expressed both at the conceptual level and at the level of organization, since conceptual coherence directly affects decisions about the order in which points are addressed.

**Cohesion** is the underlying unity that allows to maintain a clear relationship at different levels of writing: words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs.

Both of these factors impact writing at every structural level - from the order of sentences within a paragraph to the overarching organization of those paragraphs - and thus are always factors to keep in mind while writing.

Without cohesion, transitions between old and new information, or different topics, can seem abrupt and confusing to the reader. Without coherence, it can be difficult to glean the main points from a piece of writing. Outlined below are things to consider while writing and tips for implementing tools that can improve cohesion and coherence.

### Overarching organization

Both before and after writing, it can be helpful to step back and consider the large-scale organization of your article and to evaluate how its ideas are presented. The following outline provides a set of points to guide you as you ensure that your writing achieves coherence and cohesion.

#### 1. Evaluate the overarching structure of the piece.

At the highest level, each piece of writing should have a narrative arc. Consider the following guiding questions:

- How is the main idea introduced?
- How is this piece of writing structured to convey the main idea to the reader?
- In what order is information presented? Some common structures include:
  - Chronological
  - Thematic groupings
  - Compare and contrast
  - More familiar to less familiar
- How is *unfamiliar* information introduced?
  - What does your reader already know? What might they need additional background to understand?

- Is the reader guided into new ideas with information that might be more familiar to them?
- How is the conclusion drawn? Does it flow naturally from the arguments made earlier in the writing?
- Are there multiple main arguments leading to the conclusion?
  - What is the relationship between these arguments, and is it presented in the writing?
  - Is it clear how each argument naturally leads to the final conclusion?
  - Would it make sense to separate the arguments each into their own section?
- What should the major takeaway for the reader be?

## 2. Write a reverse outline to clarify the role of each paragraph and section.

If a piece is long and presents many ideas, the ideas may be separated into thematic sections to guide the reader. Within each section, individual paragraphs each provide a supporting point that builds towards the final takeaway for that section.

A quick guide to reverse outlining:

- In the left-hand margin of each section, write down the main idea in just a few words. Then, in the right-hand margin, write down how that section supports the major takeaway of the piece of writing.
- Repeat the same process for each paragraph within the section, considering how each paragraph supports the major point of the section within which it is included.
- Consider whether any paragraphs are out of place or do not fit well within the organization of your paper.

## 3. Assess cohesion and coherence within each paragraph.

Each paragraph should have just one main idea or argument, typically presented in the first 1-2 sentences. All other sentences and details in the paragraph develop that main idea.

For each paragraph, consider the following:

- What is the main idea conveyed in this paragraph?
- Is this idea clearly stated in a logical place?
  - This will typically be the first 1-2 sentences; however, a piece of writing may build up to a final point that is then conveyed at the end, for example.
- Are there multiple arguments in the paragraph?
  - If so, can you remove one of the arguments?
  - Otherwise, can you split the paragraph into two?
- Does the paragraph include any sentences that are not directly relevant to the main idea?
  - If so, is there a way that you can make those sentences more relevant?
  - Would important information be detracted if you removed this sentence?

## Transitioning from paragraph to paragraph

Once the overarching structure of the work is determined, the order of paragraphs should reflect a logical flow. However, this flow from one idea to the next may be more intuitive to the writer than the reader. Writing clear transitions from paragraph to paragraph can help make the logical flow explicitly clear to the reader.

Things to consider when transitioning between paragraphs

- Does a topic change between paragraphs seem choppy or abrupt?
- Would a reader that has little background knowledge be able to make connections between two ideas in neighboring paragraphs?
  - Often, the flow between ideas may be obvious for the writer, but not explicit to the reader.
  - Your reverse outline can be especially useful here. If you tell the story of your writing as the logical transition between the main points of each paragraph, it can be more clear where transitions are especially necessary or connections between topics are more unclear.

*Tips for implementation: concluding sentences and topic sentences*

- At the end of each paragraph, a concluding sentence can help remind the reader what the main point of the paragraph was, and help set the stage for the topic of the next paragraph.
- At the beginning of a following paragraph, a topic sentence can be utilized to refer back to topics in the previous paragraph and relate the upcoming information to the previous information.

## Sentence-level coherence and flow

While the writer usually knows their subject very well, the reader may not. Therefore, it is important for writers to introduce ideas and explain them thoroughly. Importantly, writers should identify what is old and what is new information.

*1. Use sentence structure to move from old to new information*

- Plan before you write, so you can identify which information will be seen by readers as new, complicated, or controversial.
- Ask yourself: what does your reader know, and what must the reader know?
  - First, identify a cast of characters that will be familiar to your reader *before* you write. Your reader's knowledge should set the base of familiar information.
  - Second, identify a cast of characters that must *become* familiar to your reader by the end of the text.
  - Third, plan your information flow as a well-paced transition from your reader's base to your own.
- In general, old information should come first and new information should follow.
  - Whenever possible, express at the beginning of the sentence ideas already stated, implied, safely assumed, familiar, simple

- Whenever possible, express at the end of a sentence the least predictable, least accessible, most complex, newest, or most significant information.
- Does your text require step-by-step explanations? These sections will require *topic structure*, where topics switch from old to new with careful sequencing.
- Other sections will most likely need a *focused topic structure*, where new details link to a *chaia* character familiar to the reader or central to the text as a whole.

2. Use transition words to signal relationships between ideas

- Transition words and phrases are used to ensure that ideas within or between paragraphs flow smoothly.
  - Correct use of transition words improves clarity, coherence, and overall writing quality, while incorrect usage detracts from quality and can confuse readers.
  - Related terms: linking adverbials, connective adjuncts, connectives, linking adjuncts, conjunctive adverbials, conjuncts, connective adverbs
- Transition words are often grouped based on function (contrast, amplification, cause-effect, etc.)
  - However, some transition words with a similar function may not be exact substitutes for one another. In reality, many of those in the same group have differences in meaning, nuance, and connotation.
  - The table below summarizes common transition words by function, with examples.

Transition Word	Function	Example
<b>Contrast</b>		
In contrast	Shows contrast between two comparable things  Synonymous with “but”  Not synonymous with “despite this”	<i>Northern regions experienced record snowfall last year. In contrast, southern regions had one of the mildest winters on record.</i>  <i>NOT: I’ve had breakfast; in contrast, I’m still hungry.</i>
However	Shows contrast between comparable things or between expectation and reality	<i>Northern regions experienced record snowfall last year. However, southern regions had one of the mildest winters on record. (contrasting two similar things)</i>

	Synonymous with “but” and “despite this”	<p><i>The research clearly shows the risks. However, incidence of smoking is increasing rapidly in developing countries. (contrasting expectation and reality)</i></p> <p><i>I’ve had breakfast; however, I’m still hungry.</i></p>
On the contrary	<p>Opposition (not x but y).</p> <p>Follows a negative statement and elaborates</p>	<p><i>The island was nothing like the tropical paradise we had expected. On the contrary, it was noisy, dirty, and completely unrelaxing!</i></p> <p><i>(In academic writing, the phrase “contrary to” is far more common: Contrary to the tropical paradise we had expected, the island was noisy, dirty, and completely unrelaxing.)</i></p>
On the other hand	Comparison of two choices or two sides of an issue	<i>Buying lottery tickets is probably a waste of money. On the other hand, it might be the best investment you could ever make!</i>
Nevertheless, Nonetheless	<p>Shows contrast between expectation and reality</p> <p>Synonymous with “but” and “despite this”</p>	<p><i>The research clearly shows the risks. Nevertheless, incidence of smoking is increasing rapidly in developing countries.</i></p> <p><i>I’ve had breakfast; nevertheless, I’m still hungry.</i></p>
<b>Addition</b>		
Also	<p>Almost interchangeable with “and.”</p> <p>Prefers identical subjects and usually appears after the subject.</p>	<i>The community is working to meet the needs of its citizens. The Town Council has just authorized a new senior center for the elderly. It has also implemented new social programs for teens and will be discussing a pre-school program at the next meeting.</i>

Besides	Used as a transitional adverb, “besides” adds information emphatically. It implies that previous information can be disregarded because the new information is so powerful.	<i>I’m not planning to accept the job at Harvard. It doesn’t offer enough research funding, and Boston is too cold for me. Besides, I’ve already accepted a position at UNC.</i>
Besides that	Adds information emphatically, but does not imply that previous information can be disregarded. (Compare to “besides” above.)	<i>I’m not planning to accept the job at Harvard. It doesn’t offer enough research funding, and Boston is too cold for me. Besides that, there will be very few people to collaborate with, so UNC is the best choice overall.</i>
Furthermore	Usually used when three or more reasons (or premises) are given for the same conclusion	<i>Moderate exercise has many beneficial effects. It lowers blood pressure, reduces weight, and improves overall muscle tone. Furthermore, it has the added benefit of releasing endorphins, generally improving the mood of those who exercise.</i>
In addition, Additionally	More formal than “and.” Used for joining sentences. Prefers non-identical subjects and appears before the subject.	<i>The community is working to meet the needs of its citizens. The Town Council has just authorized a new senior center for the elderly. In addition, the Parks Department has instituted a summer arts program for teens.</i>
In addition to	Use when adding a noun phrase to a sentence. Verbs in this phrase take the -ing form.	<i>In addition to building a new senior center for the elderly, the community has implemented a free senior transportation system.  In addition to the new senior center, there is a new transportation system.</i>
Moreover	Usually used when two or more reasons (or premises) are given for the same conclusion	<i>The Senator’s remarks have outraged the liberals; moreover, they have alienated the conservatives. He will surely suffer in the next election.</i>
<b>Cause-effect transitions</b>		
Consequently	Signals causal relationship	<i>He was absent over 50% of the time and missed the final exam. Consequently, he failed the course.</i>

Therefore	Signals causal relationship. Also signals a logical conclusion or reasonable inference.	<i>He was absent over 50% of the time and missed the final exam. Therefore, he failed the course.</i>  <i>He has failed several courses this year. Therefore, I think it's likely that he'll change his major.</i>
For this/that reason	Signals causal relationship when reason is explicitly stated.	<i>She was an excellent intern last summer. For this reason, I'm willing to hire her for the new full-time position.</i>
Hence, Thus	Same as "therefore" but more formal. Both of these can be used to introduce phrases rather than complete sentences.	<i>The grant is nearing the end of its cycle. Thus, we're actively seeking funding.</i>  <i>The grant is nearing the end of its cycle. Hence, the search for new funding.</i>
In that case	Signals a conditional relationship, like if->then	<i>Water may reach flood stage by morning. In that case (if that happens), the National Guard will come to assist.</i>

Adapted from the UNC Chapel Hill Writing Center <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/transitions-esl/>

## References

### Overarching Organization

- Purdue Online Writing Lab, "[Reverse Outlining: An Exercise for Taking Notes and Revising Your Work](#)"
- UT Dallas Writing Center, "[Unity in Writing](#)"
- Wheaton College Writing Center, "[Paragraph Unity, Coherence, and Development](#)"
- Joseph Williams and Joseph Bizup, "Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace"
- Grace Consecro, "Inside Academic Writing"
- Nigel Caplan, "Grammar Choices for Graduate and Professional Writers"

### Introduction

- [http://www.writingcentre.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/image\\_tool/images/167/Cohesion.pdf](http://www.writingcentre.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/image_tool/images/167/Cohesion.pdf)
- <https://www.uwb.edu/wacc/for-students/eslhandbook/coherence>
- <https://www.vcestudyguides.com/blog/coherence-and-cohesion>

### Paragraph to Paragraph Transitions

- <https://magoosh.com/pro-writing/4-ways-improve-paragraph-transitions/>
- <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/transitions/>