

Paragraph Unity

Paragraph unity involves two related but distinct concepts: coherence and flow. *Coherence* means that the ideas fit together. *Flow* means that the sentences link up so that readers are not conscious of gaps. Flow is a matter of style and exists in specific words and grammatical patterns tying one sentence to another. Coherence belongs to the substructure of the paragraph, to relationships of thought, feeling, and perception. Both are necessary if a paragraph is to be truly unified.

Coherence

To be coherent a paragraph must satisfy two criteria: First, *relevance*—every idea must relate to the topic. Second, *effective order*—ideas must be arranged in a way that clarifies their logic or their importance. There is, in addition, a negative criterion—*inclusiveness*, that nothing vital must be omitted.

Relevance

A topic sentence makes a promise that the paragraph must fulfill. Do not wander from the topic. No matter how attractive an idea may seem, let it go if you cannot fit it into the

topic you have staked out or cannot revise the topic to include it. Here is an example of a paragraph marred by irrelevance:

[1] College is very different from high school. [2] The professors talk a great deal more and give longer homework assignments. [3] This interferes with your social life. [4] It may even cost you your girlfriend. [5] Girls don't like to be told that you have to stay home and study when they want to go to a show or go dancing. [6] So they find some other boy who doesn't have to study all the time. [7] Another way college is different is the examinations. . . .

The paragraph begins well. The first sentence establishes the topic and the second supports it. Then the writer begins to slide away. Sentences 3 and 4 might be allowed if they were subordinated. But 5 and 6 lose contact. True, some people do not like to take second place to homework, but that is not pertinent here. In sentence 7 the writer tacitly acknowledges that he has wandered, throwing out a long transitional lifeline to haul us back to the topic. Rid of irrelevance, the paragraph might read:

College is very different from high school. The professors talk a great deal more and give longer homework assignments, which interfere with your social life. College examinations, too, are different. . . .

Order of Thought

Relevance alone is not enough to establish coherence. All the ideas in a paragraph can relate to the topic yet be poorly arranged.

Arrangement often inheres in the subject itself. A paragraph about baking a cake or preparing to water-ski is committed to following the steps of the process it describes. Telling a story, you must follow a certain sequence of events. And in some subjects there is a logical structure implicit in the

subject that determines order of thought, as in this example about the value of opposition in politics:

The opposition is indispensable. A good statesman, like any other sensible human being, always learns more from his opponents than from his fervent supporters. For his supporters will push him to disaster unless his opponents show him where the dangers are. So if he is wise he will often pray to be delivered from his friends, because they will ruin him. But, though it hurts, he ought also to pray never to be left without opponents; for they keep him on the path of reason and good sense.

Walter Lippmann

There is a necessary order of thought here: **first** the assertion, next a reason supporting it, and then a conclusion, introduced by "so."

There are times, however, when the order of thought is less a function of the subject itself than of the writer's view of it. For instance, if you were writing about the three things that most surprised you the first time you visited, say, New York City, you might not find any logical or temporal relationship between those things.

One solution in such cases is to arrange ideas in order of relative importance, either climactically, placing the most important last, or anticlimactically, putting it first. If you cannot discern any shadings of importance, consider which order best connects with what has gone before or with what will come next. Should you find no basis whatever for arranging the ideas within a paragraph, then, of course, any order is legitimate. But this is not likely to happen often. Most of the time a proper or at least a most effective way of sequencing ideas does exist.

Paragraph Flow

Flow, those visible links which bind the sentences of a paragraph, can be established in two basic ways. (They are compatible; a paragraph may employ both.) The first is to

establish a master plan at the beginning of the paragraph and to introduce each new idea by a word or phrase that marks its place in the plan. The second concentrates on linking sentences successively as the paragraph develops, making sure that each statement connects with the one or ones preceding it.

Setting Up a Master Plan

The opening sentence makes clear, not only the topic, but also how it will be analyzed and developed:

There are three kinds of book owners. The first has **all** the standard sets and **bestsellers—unread**, untouched. (This deluded individual owns woodpulp and ink, not books.) The second has a great many **books—a few of them read through**, most of them dipped into, but all of them as clean and shiny as the day they were bought. (This person would probably like to make books his own, but is restrained by a false respect for their physical appearance.) The third has a few books or **many—every** one of them dog-eared and dilapidated, shaken and loosened by continual use, marked and scribbled in from front to back. (This man owns books.)

Mortimer Adler

Adler early on indicates his plan ("three kinds") and introduces each aspect of the topic with the appropriate term: "First," "second," "third." Sometimes, instead of words, numbers or letters introduce the parts of a paragraph:

For the majority of situations in which a dictionary is consulted for meaning, words may be roughly divided into three groups: (1) Hard words which circumstances make immediately important: "The doctor prescribed synthesized *cortisone*." "*Recidivism* is a serious criminal problem in some urban communities." "*Existentialism* is a subjective philosophy." (2) Words frequently seen, usually understood loosely, but suddenly and recurrently unstable (for the individual): *synthesize*, *urban* and *subjective* in the preceding sen-

tences. (3) Common familiar words which unexpectedly need to be differentiated (*break* vs. *tear*, *shrub* vs. *bush*) or specifically clarified, such as *fable*, *adventure*, *shake*, *door*, *remainder*, *evil*. Most people get by without having to clarify these common words in the third group until they become an issue. Without an issue definitions of these common words are frequently jumped on because the word looks easy to the uninitiated, although in practice they are usually more difficult than hard words to define. Philip B. Gove

Numbering the parts of a **paragraph**—whether with words or with figures—is simple and clear. But it suits only topics which can be easily broken into parts. Moreover, it can seem mechanical and, overused, prove confusing. In a short essay one paragraph using this method of flow is enough.

The obviousness of "first," "second," "third" can be avoided by introducing key terms right in the topic sentence to label the particular parts of the subject, and repeating those terms as each aspect is brought forward in the body of the paragraph (*italics* are added):

We are controlled here by our confusion, far more than we know, and the American dream has therefore become something much more closely resembling a nightmare, on the *private*, *domestic*, and *international* levels. *Privately*, we cannot stand our lives and dare not examine them; *domestically*, we take no responsibility for (and no pride in) what goes on in our country; and, *internationally*, for many millions of people we are an unmitigated disaster.

James Baldwin

One way of creating flow, then, is to announce your plan and explicitly fit each unit into that plan. It is not a method confined to single paragraphs. You can use it to organize a portion of a long paragraph (which is what Baldwin does), or expand it to organize a short theme, in which case the units would be individual paragraphs rather than sentences. But it is, as we said, a mechanical mode of organization to be employed with restraint.

Linking Successive Sentences

The second way of maintaining flow is to connect sentences as you go. Less obvious than "first," "second," "third," this means of achieving flow seems more natural. And it can accommodate more complex relationships among ideas; it is not confined to topics that can be broken into a numbered series.

Sentences can be linked in several ways.

▷ *Repeating Key Words*

Verbal repetition is the most obvious link. Sometimes the identical word is **repeated**—as in the short paragraph which follows on Saint Patrick—sometimes variant forms of the same word, and sometimes synonymous terms:

We know that among the marks of holiness is the working of miracles. Ireland is the greatest miracle any saint ever worked. It is a miracle and a nexus of miracles. Among other miracles it is a nation raised from the dead.

Hilaire Belloc

The repeated words may occur in a variety of positions. Of these the most useful are the beginnings of successive sentences, the endings of such sentences, and the close of one sentence and the opening of the one immediately following (the italics are added in the following examples):

No man of note was ever further separated from life and fact than Lindbergh. *No man* could be more reluctant to admit it.

John Lardner

Charles R. Forbes *went to jail*. Albert B. Fall *went to jail*. Alien Property Custodian Thomas W. Miller *went to jail*.

Samuel Hopkins Adams

Such plants to operate successfully had to *run at capacity*. *To run at capacity* they needed outlets for their whole output.

Thurman Arnold

A special case of synonymous repetition involves pronouns and demonstratives such as *one*, *another*, *some*, *the former*, *the latter*, *the first*, *the second*, *the third*, and so on. These words link sentences by substituting for an earlier word or phrase. *This* and *that* (along with their plurals *these* and *those*) are especially useful in this way and may be employed either as pronouns or as adjectives (italics are added):

The blind in particular seem to become indifferent to climatic extremes; and there must be in everyone's cognizance two or three immovable sightless mendicants defying rain and chill. . . .

This insensitiveness to January blasts and February drenchings may be one of the compensations that the blind enjoy. Whatever else happens to them they never, perhaps, catch cold. And *that* is more than something.

E. v. Lucas

There is a danger, however, in using *this* or *that* as subjects. A connection clear to the writer does not always jump at the reader. The risk increases when the antecedent of the *this* or *that* is not a single word but a group of words, even a complex idea stretched over several sentences. It is sometimes better to use these words not as nouns but as adjectives modifying a more precise **subject-word** which clearly sums up the preceding point, as Lucas does with "*this* insensitiveness." As an adjective the *this* still hooks the new sentence to what has preceded it, but with less risk of confusion.

▷ *Conjunctive Adverbs*

Sentences can also be linked by conjunctive (also called transitional) adverbs, which indicate relationships between ideas. The relationship may be one of time (*presently*, *meanwhile*, *afterwards*); of space (*above*, *below*, *in front*); or of logic (*therefore*, *however*, *as a result*).

In the following example the critic F. L. Lucas creates flow by transitional words (here italicized) in a passage answering the claim that metaphor has no place in prose:

The truth seems that metaphor too is older than any literature—an immemorial human impulse perhaps as much utilitarian as literary. For there appears little ground for assigning poetic motives to the first man who called the hole in a needle its "eye," or the projections on a saw its "teeth." *In fine*, metaphor is an inveterate human tendency, as ancient perhaps as the days of the mammoth, yet vigorous still in the days of the helicopter. *Why then* should it be banned from prose?

"For.... *In fine* ... then" establish the logical framework of the argument:

Assertion	Sentence 1
Reason	"For," sentence 2
Assertion restated	"In fine," sentence 3
Conclusion	"then," sentence 4

Transitional adverbs are best placed at or near the beginning of the sentence. Readers are like people groping down a dark passage, and an important part of the writer's task is to show them the way. Connective words are signal lights telling readers what to expect. *However* flashes, "Contradiction ahead"; *in fact* warns, "Here comes a strong restatement of something just said"; and *therefore*, "A conclusion or a consequence is approaching."

Acquiring a working set of conjunctive adverbs is not difficult. English is rich in them. Just to show some sort of contradiction or opposition, for example, we have *but*, *however*, *still*, *yet*, *nonetheless*, *nevertheless*, *though*, *instead*, *on the other hand*, *on the contrary*, *notwithstanding*, *even so*, and the list is not complete. While they show generally the same basic relationship, these words are not exact equivalents. They convey nuances of idea and tone. *Nevertheless*, for instance, is a more formal word than *though*. Because of such slight but important **differences** in meaning and tone, good writers have ready at hand a number of transitional adverbs. If you can call only upon *but* or *however* you cannot communicate what is implied by *yet* or *still* or *though*.

And and *but* present a special case. Most often they act as conjunctive adverbs, joining words, phrases, or clauses within a sentence. But they can also function adverbially. Sometimes one hears the warning, "Never begin a sentence with *and* or *but*." The fact is that good writers do begin with these words (the italics are added):

Is not indeed every man a student, and do not all things exist for the student's behoof? *And*, finally, is not the true scholar the only true master?
Ralph Waldo Emerson

I come finally to the chief defiler of undergraduate writing. *And* I regret to say that we professors are certainly the culprits. *And what* we are doing we do in all innocence and with the most laudable of motives.
Willard Thorp

Natural philosophy had in the Middle Ages become a closed chapter of human endeavour. . . .

But although the days of Greek science had ended, its results had not been lost.
Kurt Mendelssohn

As sentence openers *and* and *but* are very useful. *But* is less formal than *however*, while *and* is less formal and ponderous than *furthermore* or *moreover* or *additionally*. Don't be afraid of initial *ands* and *huts*. But use them moderately.

l> *Syntactic Patterning*

Syntactic patterning simply means repeating the same basic structure in successive or near successive sentences. It often holds together the parts of a comparison or contrast:

In bankless Iowa City eggs sell for ten cents a dozen. In Chicago the breadlines stretch endlessly along the dirty brick walls in windy Streets.
Wallace Stegner

That New York was much more dry [non-alcoholic] on Sunday during the summer is true. That it was as dry as [Theodore] Roosevelt believed it—"I have, for once, absolutely enforced the law in New York"—is improbable. That it was dry enough to excite the citizenry to new heights of indignation is clear.
Henry F. Pringle

Syntactic patterning may be more extensive, working throughout most of a paragraph:

It is common knowledge that millions of underprivileged families want adequate food and housing. What is less commonly remarked is that after they have adequate food and housing they **will** want to be served at a fine restaurant and to have a weekend cottage by the sea. People want tickets to the Philharmonic and vacation trips abroad. They want fine china and silver dinner sets and handsome clothes. The illiterate want to learn how to read. Then they want education, and then more education, and then they want their sons and daughters to become doctors and lawyers. It is frightening to see so many millions of people wanting so much. It is almost like being present at the Oklahoma land rush, except that millions are involved instead of hundreds, and instead of land, the prize is everything that life has to offer.

Samuel c. Florman

While reusing the same sentence pattern often involves repeating some words, the similar grammatical structure is in itself a strong connective device. However, you cannot impose such syntactic patterning on just any group of sentences. It works only when the underlying thought is repetitious, as in the example above, where the sentences list a series of rising expectations common to Americans. In such cases the similarity of pattern does what ideally all sentence structure should do: the form reinforces the sense.

For Practice

▷ List all the transitional devices that link the sentences in the following paragraph:

Above the beginner's level, the important fact is that writing cannot be taught exclusively in a course called English Composition. Writing can only be taught by the united efforts of the entire teaching staff. This holds good of any school, college, or university. Joint effort is needed, not merely to "enforce the rules"; it is needed to insure accuracy in every subject. How can an answer in physics or a translation from the French or an historical statement be called

correct if the phrasing is loose or the key word wrong? Students argue that the reader of the paper knows perfectly well what is meant. Probably so, but a written exercise is designed to be read; it is not supposed to be a challenge to clairvoyance. My Italian-born tailor periodically sends me a postcard which runs: "Your clothes is ready and should come down for a fitting." I understand him, but the art I honor him for is cutting cloth, not precision of utterance. Now a student in college must be inspired to achieve in all subjects the utmost accuracy of perception combined with the utmost artistry of expression. The two merge and develop the sense of good workmanship, or preference for quality and truth, which is the chief mark of the genuinely educated man. Jacques Barzun

> The paragraph below lacks unity. The problem may be inadequate links between sentences, or it may go deeper, involving incoherence of thought. Rewrite the paragraph, staying as close as possible to the original wording but changing what needs to be changed to give the paragraph coherence and flow:

There are several kinds of test. Quizzes deal with only a small amount of material, usually that covered in the preceding week or two. Pop quizzes are often given without any announcement. Students often miss them and have to arrange makeups. Examinations are longer and cover more ground. The midterm comes in about the sixth or seventh week and in some courses is the only grade the teacher has for the midsemester mark. It is important. The final comes at the end of the course and is a large part of your grade. Students work hard preparing for finals.