Make It Coherent

A good paragraph is like liquid honey—it flows and it sticks together. A coherent paragraph leads readers smoothly from the topic sentence to the concluding one.

The "stickiness" comes from using ordering principles, pronouns, combining sentences, transitional words, and repetition.

One way to achieve coherence is to decide on an ordering principle for the ideas in your paragraph. This relates to the patterns of development that we talked about in the third video.

For example, narrative paragraphs use a chronological ordering principle and usually relate events connected by time. You'll often find narrative paragraphs using transitions like then, *next*, and *finally*. There are many other ordering principles used to create coherent paragraphs including comparison–contrast and cause–effect methods. The important point is to choose one method that fits your material, and make sure you use it consistently to link the ideas in your paragraph together.

Another way to achieve coherence is to use pronouns to refer to nouns in previous sentences in the paragraph. Here's an example:

> Fred Smith has a problem. Fred has too many cats. Fred's problem started innocently enough with one female cat. The female cat had kittens. The kittens grew up, and the kittens had kittens. Fred has thirty cats. Fred spends most of Fred's energy and resources on maintaining thirty cats. Fred is exhausted.

This does not sound like mature prose. We will make this paragraph coherent.

Let's start by using some pronouns to show that we are not starting a new topic with every sentence:

> Fred Smith has a problem. He has too many cats. This problem started innocently enough with one female cat. She had kittens. They grew up, and the kittens had kittens. Fred has thirty cats. He spends most of his energy and resources on maintaining them. He is exhausted.

Note that I kept one extra mention of Fred to help bring the reader back to him after talking about the cats.

This does sound more connected, but there are other things we can do to improve the coherence. One is combining sentences to join related ideas and make the less important information subordinate to the main points:

> Fred Smith has a problem. He has too many cats. This problem started innocently enough with one female cat, but she had kittens that grew up and had more kittens. Fred now has thirty cats and spends most of his energy and resources on maintaining them. He is exhausted.

Note that I also added the transitional word 'now', and this is flowing pretty well.

A word of caution about using pronouns: make sure it is clear what noun the pronoun is pointing to, called the *antecedent*, or you could cause more confusion than coherence. Consider this example:

> Turnbull chooses words that could be found in any newspaper. Like a newspaper writer, he writes it so most readers at a grade nine level could read it. They are also at most, one or two syllables. It makes this very readable and informal, and they create a nice style.

Confusing, no?

Let's look at the first two sentences. Here, it is clear that Turnbull's work is being compared to that of a newspaper writer, but it's not clear what noun "it" refers to. The noun could be *newspaper*, but then it sounds like Turnbull is writing a newspaper article, which is probably not what the writer intended. A simple edit creates coherence by eliminating the unclear pronoun reference:

> Turnbull chooses words that could be found in any newspaper. Like a newspaper reporter, he writes to make his work readable at a grade nine level.

 Now let's tackle the rest.

We now have to reestablish that 'they' refers to the antecedent 'words. Let's try moving the antecedent closer to its pronoun:

> Like a newspaper reporter, Turnbull writes to make his work readable at a grade nine level. He chooses words that could be found in any newspaper. They are at most one or two syllables. It makes this very readable and informal, and they create a nice style.

We don't need the 'also' or the comma. 'It' seems to be referring to using short words, and 'this' to Turnbull's writing, but I don't like having to stop and figure this out. Let's try combining some ideas:

> Like a newspaper reporter, Turnbull writes to make his work readable at a grade nine level. He chooses words of one or two syllables at most that could be found in any newspaper. This creates a very readable and informal style.

I like this better. We've linked each pronoun reference to a clear antecedent, and we have combined ideas to reduce the work it takes to understand the paragraph.

I hope that these examples also showed you that much of what writers refer to by the general term 'style' can be developed by systematically applying coherence principles.

Great writers may be born, but you can become a very good writer with effort, and no writer becomes great or good without a lot of practice. So don't be easily discouraged.

Transitional words and phrases also help to create coherence by providing bridges between sentences within the paragraph and between paragraphs.

For example, words and phrases like "also," "in addition to," "additionally" and "furthermore" signal your readers that that the relationship between two sentences is one of addition.

Other word and phrase groups can create relationships of **detail or example: "**for example," "that is," "more specifically"; **logic**: "therefore," "thus," "in conclusion"; **contrast**: "yet," "nevertheless," "on the other hand"; or **similarity**: "likewise," "similarly," "in other words".

See the link to the left of the screen for more lists of transitional words and phrases.

As we saw in the previous example, throwing in unrelated transitional words will make your paragraph more difficult for the reader's brain to process. Make sure that the link you have created between your sentences is a clear and logical one. For example, if you write "therefore," the sentence that follows should flow logically from the previous one—know what the 'therefore' is there for! If you write "similarly," make sure that there is, in fact, similarity between the two ideas.

Most developing writers are taught to avoid repetition, and this is good advice to a point, but a certain amount of redundancy is necessary for effective communication. Judicious repetition of key words and phrases and synonyms throughout a paper can provide your readers with necessary signposts and strengthen the flow of the essay.

The key to using repetition of words and phrases effectively is to keep your readers in mind. If you use too little variation, they'll be bored. If you use multiple terms for the same thing, your readers could easily become confused.

As a guideline, use no more than two separate terms or phrases per paragraph. In a short paragraph, that number is usually enough to create variety without creating confusion.

Click on the link to the left for editing tips to achieve coherent paragraphs.

Before you go on, you may want to try the self test directly below this video to see what you remember about making a paragraph coherent.

Video 4 transcript