

The Importance of Continuity

What follows is really part of the “Final Tips” section that concludes this chapter, but since it’s both lengthy and vitally important, I want to discuss it separately.

Good writers are sticklers for continuity. They won’t let themselves write a sentence that isn’t clearly connected to the ones immediately preceding and following it. They want their prose to flow, and they know this is the only way to achieve that beautiful effect.

But how are these connections to be made? The better the writer, the less need he has for mechanical means of connecting his ideas, too many of which tend to clutter an argument. Instead, he relies chiefly on a coherent understanding of what he wants to say, a simple style, the occasional repetition of key words, and the careful use of pronouns such as *this* and *that*. In manner he resembles a furniture maker who uses interlocking tongues and grooves to do the work of nails and screws.

Sometimes, though, a situation will require a more explicit connective—such as when the direction of the argument is turning or when an idea is to be paralleled or contrasted with an earlier idea. In these situations, the writer will call upon a conjunctive adverb or brief transitional phrase to signal the kind of thought that’s coming next. I call this “signposting” an argument. Here he has choices within choices. As Rudolf Flesch points out in *The Art of Plain Talk*, some conjunctive adverbs are bookish—that is, used chiefly in print—whereas others are conversational and for that reason less stuffy. In the list below, the bookish ones are followed in parentheses by their conversational equivalents. Keep in mind, though, that the equivalence in each case is approximate, not perfect. Note, too, that the bookish adverbs can afford you greater variety and precision of meaning—which is doubtless why we encounter them more often in books than in conversation:

above all	in particular
accordingly (and so)	instead
admittedly	in summary
again	likewise (and)
also	moreover
besides	more specifically
but	(for example)
certainly	nevertheless (but)
consequently (and so)	nonetheless
finally	on the other hand
first	rather (however, instead)
for example	second
for instance	similarly
furthermore	so
hence (therefore)	still
however	then
in addition (besides, also)	therefore
in conclusion	though
indeed (in fact)	thus (therefore, so)
in fact	to sum up
	yet

It's a rather overwhelming list, isn't it? (And it's only a partial one.) But the sheer number of transitional words indicates, among other things, just how important signposting an argument really is. Continuity doesn't magically happen; it's *created*. The surest way your reader will know how your ideas connect is by your telling her. These are the words you tell her with. I suggest you keep the list propped up before you the next few times you write an essay. It will remind you to give your reader the directional signals she needs; it will save you word-hunting; and (a nice bonus) it will suggest an occasional new avenue of thought simply by tempting your mind to explore other directions of argument—a "nevertheless" thought, perhaps, or a "consequently," or a "for example."

Final Tips

1. “Well, what does it finally add up to?” This is the reader’s invariable question. Your essay is the reply: “It finally adds up to this, in my opinion. . . .” Don’t begin writing a final draft (there may be more than one!) until you have asked yourself the reader’s question and understand clearly your intended reply. If your reply contains an original perception, if it’s debatable, and if you’ve been able to state it in one sentence, it’s a good thesis. Now go ahead and prove it.

2. Think of yourself as a prosecuting attorney, think of your essay as a case, and think of your reader as a highly skeptical jury.

3. To prove your case, you’ll generally have to substantiate several things. The prosecutor, for example, must substantiate that the defendant had the motive, the means, and the opportunity to commit the crime. So determine what things you must substantiate, classify your evidence according to those things, and then substantiate them, *one at a time*. This is called “dividing up the proof.” If you follow this procedure, you’ll find that structuring your essay is relatively simple.

4. Signpost your argument every step of the way. If you have three important pieces of evidence to support a particular contention, *tell* your reader so she can understand precisely where you’re going. For instance: “Three examples will bear this out. First, the original treaty of 1923” Similarly, if you have three arguments and if one is stronger than the others, save it for last and *label* it as the strongest. For instance: “Finally and most seriously, capital punishment strikes at the very basis of morality itself.”

5. Assertions are fine, but unless you prove them with hard evidence, they remain simply assertions. So, assert, *then support*; assert, *then support*; assert, *then support*—and so on throughout your essay. Remember, *examples* and *facts* are the meat of it. They do the actual convincing; they also have their own eloquence.

6. Some paragraphs, like transitional and one-sentence paragraphs, are special-occasion devices and follow their own rules. (I’ll be speaking more about them later.) The normal paragraph, though, resembles a good essay: it has unity by virtue of being organized around a single major point. Several examples may be brought in to support that point, and several ideas to qualify it, and several sentences to illuminate its implications, but there’s still only a *single major point*. “One main contention per paragraph”—it’s a sensible guideline to follow. If you don’t follow it, your points will tend to get lost, and so will your reader.

7. Instead of viewing the opening sentence of each paragraph as a topic sentence, as you've probably been taught to do, try this:

View each paragraph opener as a *bridge sentence* aimed at smoothing our way into the new paragraph.

More than one student has said that's the single best tip they've carried away from their writing conferences with me. I say this only to underscore the difference it can make in your prose style. Below are a number of paragraph openers from a famous *Atlantic Monthly* article by Bergen Evans called "But What's a Dictionary For?"—a review of Merriam-Webster's revolutionary *Third New International Dictionary*. They will illustrate the bridging technique graphically:

- a. What underlines all this sound and fury?
- b. So monstrous a discrepancy in evaluation requires us to examine basic principles.
- c. Yet wild wails arose.
- d. More subtly, but persuasively, it has changed under the influence of mass education and the growth of democracy.
- e. And the papers have no choice.
- f. And so back to our questions: what's a dictionary for, and how, in 1962, can it best do what it ought to do?
- g. Even in so settled a matter as spelling, a dictionary cannot always be absolute.
- h. Has he been betrayed?
- i. Under these circumstances, what is a dictionary to do?
- j. An illustration is furnished by an editorial in the *Washington Post* (January 17, 1962).
- k. In part, the trouble is due to the fact that there is no standard for standard.

Even out of context, these sentences suggest how skillfully Evans is guiding his readers—building bridges for us, persuading us. We never come to a new paragraph wondering, "Where am I? How did I get here?" To repeat a point I made a few moments ago: Continuity doesn't magically happen; it's *created*.