

Writing - Week 6

Cohesion & Coherence

Example

Which passage do you prefer? Why? What do you not like about the other one?

The safeguard of democracy everywhere – an educated citizenry – is being threatened by college costs that have been rising fast for the last several years. Increases in family income have been significantly outpaced by increases in tuition at colleges and universities during that period. Only the children of the wealthiest families in our society will be able to afford a college education if this trend continues. Knowledge and intellectual skills, in addition to wealth, will divide us as a people, when that happens. Equal opportunity and the egalitarian basis of our democratic society could be eroded by such a divide.

In the last several years, college costs have been rising so fast that they are now threatening the safeguard of democracy everywhere: an educated citizenry. During that period, tuition has significantly outpaced increases in family income. If this trend continues, a college education will soon be affordable only by the children of the wealthiest families in our society. When that happens, we will be divided as a people not only by wealth, but by knowledge and intellectual skills. Such a divide will erode equal opportunity and the egalitarian basis of our democratic society.

Cohesion and Coherence

A passage of writing is

- **Cohesive** based on how each sentence ends and the next begins. Pairs of sentences fit together like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.
- **Coherent** based on how all the sentences in it cumulatively begin. All the sentences in a piece of writing add up to a larger whole, like how all the pieces in a puzzle add up to the picture on the box.

Cohesion

Principle: Put old information before new information.

1. Begin sentences with information familiar to your readers.
 - Familiar if it's from sentences they just read.
 - Familiar if it's part of general knowledge.
2. End sentences with information your readers cannot anticipate.
3. Begin sentences with information that readers will find simple; end with information they will find complex.

How are these principles followed (or not) in the previous examples?

Example

Rewrite the bold sentence, so old information comes before new:

Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. **The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble creates a black hole.** So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.

Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. **A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble.** So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.

Sayner, Wisconsin, is the snowmobile capital of the world. The buzzing of snowmobile engines fills the air, and their tank-like tracks crisscross the snow. The snow reminds me of Mom's mashed potatoes, covered with furrows I would draw with my fork. Her mashed potatoes usually make me sick -- that's why I play with them. I like to make a hole in the middle of the potatoes and fill it with melted butter. This behavior has been the subject of long chats between my analyst and me.

Does it satisfy our principles so far:

- Make main characters the subjects of sentences.
- Make important actions verbs.
- Put old information before new information.

Incoherent for 3 reasons:

1. Subjects of the sentences are entirely unrelated.
2. Sentences share no common themes or ideas.
3. There is no one sentence that states what the whole passage is about.

Coherence

Readers judge a passage to be **coherent** if they can quickly and easily see two things:

- The topics of individual sentences and clauses
 - *Topic*: what a sentence is “about”, or what it “comments on”.
(psychological term, not grammatical)
 - Not necessarily a sentence’s grammatical subject, although in writing that is clear & coherent, it often is.
- How the topics in the passage make up a related set of concepts.

Revising for coherence

Consistent ideas toward the beginnings of sentences, especially in their subjects, help readers understand what a passage is generally about. A sense of coherence arises when a sequence of topics comprises a narrow set of related ideas. But the context of each sentence is lost by seemingly random shifts of topics. Unfocused, even disorganized paragraphs result when that happens.

1. **Underline** the first 7-8 words in every sentence in a passage, stopping when you hit a verb.
 - Can also underline the first 5-6 words of every clause in those sentences.

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2. **Assess:**

- Do the underlined words constitute a small set of related ideas?
- Do the underlined words name important characters, real or abstract?

3. **Rewrite.**

- Imagine giving the passage a title. The words in it probably name important topics.
- In most sentences (not necessarily all), use subjects to name topics.
- Put subjects/topics close to the beginnings of your sentences.
- Make sure these topics are familiar to your readers.

Revising for coherence

Readers understand what a passage is generally about when **they** see consistent ideas toward the beginnings of sentences, especially in their subjects. **They** feel a passage is coherent when **they** read a sequence of topics that focuses on a narrow set of related ideas. But when **topics** seem to shift randomly, **readers** lose the context of each sentence. When **that** happens, **they** feel they are reading paragraphs that are unfocused and even disorganized.

Topics boldfaced.

Main concepts: *readers* and *topics*.

Topic string: *readers, they, they, they, topics, readers, that, they [readers]*.

Hint: *the principle of coherence is useful when reading too! Scan beginnings of sentences to get a sense of what a paragraph is about.*

Summary

Old principles:

- Make main characters the subjects of sentences.
- Make important actions verbs.

New principles:

- In each sentence, put old information before new information. (Cohesion)
- Through a series of sentences, keep topics short and reasonably consistent, and put them near the beginnings of sentences or clauses. (Coherence)