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Writing Effective Paragraphs

What is a paragraph?

A paragraph is much more than a collection of connected sentences. It is a building block of essay development, and paragraphs provide the structure needed to develop the thesis of a paper. In fact, a useful way to think about a paragraph is as a “mini-essay,” or an essay within an essay, with its own mini-thesis (the topic sentence), middle or body (the supporting details) and end or conclusion (the concluding sentence).

To understand how paragraphs help to develop a thesis, think of them as landmarks on a map. With each paragraph, you describe where you are standing and point the direction for your readers to make sure they complete the journey to your conclusion. A vague signpost or a detour down a side trail could well have your readers lost and wondering where you are taking them. Clear signals, on the other hand, in the form of clearly worded topic sentences, relevant support, reasonable interpretations of material, and logical conclusions will help your readers follow the development of your ideas.

Types of paragraphs in a basic essay

In an essay, there are four types of paragraphs—introductory, body, transitional and concluding—and each serves a slightly different function in the paper. In the simplest terms, introductory paragraphs introduce your thesis, body paragraphs develop it, transitional paragraphs move your readers from one aspect of it to another, and concluding paragraphs sum up the development of the thesis and restate it. Thus, while all four types support the thesis, they support it in different ways.

Introductory paragraphs

An introductory paragraph supports the thesis in three ways. First, it engages readers’ interest with a strong opening sentence. Some writing texts advise using a quotation or an anecdote to capture readers’ attention, and this can work well. Whatever kind of opening you use, however, it should be relevant to your subject and move your readers quickly and smoothly toward your thesis. An introductory paragraph also supports the thesis by giving relevant background information and context, such as important facts or theory. For example, if you were writing an introduction to a paper about Napoleon’s loss at Waterloo, before presenting your thesis statement, you might offer a sentence or two about the ongoing hostilities that led up to the final battle. This sketch of important background should be accomplished quickly with just enough information to help your readers understand why your subject and thesis are important.

The third, and perhaps most important function of an introductory paragraph, is to introduce the thesis statement and thereby focus your readers on the central idea of your paper. Definitions of a thesis statement vary somewhat, but almost all instructors take a thesis to mean the central idea, opinion, assertion, claim or attitude of the paper. At the core of a thesis statement is the writer's controlling idea on the topic, e.g. "Unchecked northern development raises serious concerns." Some instructors understand a complete thesis statement also to include specific reasons in support of the controlling idea, e.g. "Unchecked northern development raises serious concerns because it jeopardizes and contaminates the biospheres, depletes energy resources before alternatives are available, and magnifies social problems." Some instructors also think of the thesis as the answer to a question implied by the assignment. Although some methods of topic development place the thesis near the end of the paper or even in the conclusion, in most academic writing, it appears near the end of the introductory paragraph. Placed there, the thesis provides a preview of the main idea you will develop in your essay and prepares your readers for that development.

[Click here for a sample of an introductory paragraph](#)

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Body paragraphs

Once you have engaged your readers and presented your thesis in your introduction, use your body paragraphs to fully develop your ideas. You can do this by first introducing a sub-topic of the thesis in a topic sentence. For example, if you were expanding a theme about Napoleon's loss at Waterloo, you might have a topic sentence that reads like this: "Napoleon brought on one of the first financial crises of the French government by emptying government coffers for his war with Britain." Notice that the topic sentence doesn't provide details, just the general topic of the paragraph. Notice also that the topic sentence tells readers how the paragraph's topic/main idea relates to the essay's core thesis. In other words, a topic sentence not only gives a fact but makes a point or gives an interpretation about that fact, showing how it is relevant or significant to the essay's core purpose. It is important to remember, too, that the topic sentence is **your** idea, based on the interpretation of your sources.

With your topic sentence in place, you can now develop your idea with sentences that provide *supporting details*. In the above example, these details might be facts about the repercussions of Napoleon's financial crisis or about opposition that he faced as a result. In a history paper, these details would most likely take the form of quotations or paraphrases from sources, but depending on your **writing purpose, audience,** and discipline, supporting details might also be facts, personal anecdotes, or logical reasoning. Whatever form of **evidence** you use, make sure it is convincing to your audience within the context of your writing purpose and that it supports the statement you make in your topic sentence.

In well-developed body paragraphs, you not only have to provide evidence to support the topic sentence, you also have to *interpret* it for your readers. (Remember, you are providing signposts for them.) For example, if you were developing the paragraph about Napoleon’s financial mismanagement, it would not be enough to provide quotes or paraphrases with the facts. You would have to *show* readers how those details supported the idea that Napoleon’s financial mismanagement was connected to his final defeat at Waterloo. In other words, as a writer, you are obliged to *interpret* sources, facts or reasoning and connect the interpretation to the **thesis statement** with transition signals.

Remember the idea of a paragraph as a mini-essay? Just as all essays have conclusions that review and sum up the ideas in a paper, a paragraph has a concluding sentence that *sums up* the point of the paragraph and ties it clearly to the thesis. Thus, a concluding sentence for our hypothetical paragraph about Napoleon’s financial woes might read: “In this way, the hostility that Napoleon engendered in the French banking community began a series of events that would end in his defeat at Waterloo.” A good concluding sentence sums up the main point of the paragraph and provides readers with the “so what?”—the reason that the point is important to the conclusion of the paper.

[Click here for a sample of a body paragraph](#)

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Transitional Paragraphs

There may be times when you want to shift from one sub-topic of your thesis to another or from a general discussion to a more detailed treatment of an idea. At these times, you can use a transitional paragraph to sum up and hint at the material to come. In other words, transitional paragraphs act as signposts that guide readers to the next part of your essay. Because transitional paragraphs serve such a specific function, you will not find many of them in an essay, and in a shorter piece, there may not be any. Save transitional paragraphs for times when you think your readers might be confused or lost if you introduce the next part of your essay before reviewing the ground you have already covered.

In the previous example about Napoleon and Waterloo, if the writer had discussed a number of instances of financial mismanagement that led to Waterloo and then wanted to discuss military causes of Napoleon’s final defeat, she might include a transitional paragraph like this: “Up to that point, Napoleon’s financial mismanagement might not have been fatal. Despite the hostility of the French bankers, he still had allies who were willing to supply money even when the bankers were not. However, Napoleon also had military problems that, when combined with a shortage of money, made Waterloo inescapable. Ultimately, these military problems put further pressure on French coffers...” Here, the writer has summed up the importance of previously developed

material on the financial causes of defeat and suggested that she will go on to discuss military causes. Without a transitional paragraph, this shift might have seemed abrupt or confusing to readers.

Concluding Paragraphs

Some students think that the purpose of a conclusion is to restate the thesis and this is partly true. The conclusion should reassert the core idea of your paper, but it should also clearly flow from the material you have carefully developed in your body paragraphs and thus, it should be more than a mechanical restatement of your thesis. Rather, an effective concluding paragraph should reinforce the central idea of your paper and leave your readers satisfied that you have made your case.

One way to ensure that you have written an effective conclusion is to ask, “Does it strengthen the main message of my paper?” If it draws conclusions from the points you have made in your paper or suggests the implications of them, chances are your conclusion is fully developed. For example, in our essay on Napoleon, a writer might summarize the financial and military reasons for his defeat at Waterloo, restate the thesis that Napoleon’s defeat was the result of errors in financial and military judgment, and then suggest that his defeat decided the fate of modern Europe. This sums up the material from the body and suggests the larger importance of the thesis to the reader.

[Click here for a sample of a concluding paragraph](#)

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Writing effective paragraphs

In general, in order for a paragraph to be effective, it must have three characteristics: **unity, development and coherence.**

Unity

The first characteristic of an effective paragraph is unity, which means that all sentences in the paragraph explain, develop, and support a central idea in some way. In other words, every paragraph must have a purpose within your paper, and all the sentences must somehow advance that purpose. This means that ALL sentences—topic sentence, supporting ones, and concluding sentence—must be more than loosely related to the sub-topic. They must all advance the paragraph’s purpose as well as the thesis. Why should you aim for a unified paragraph? Because in a dis-unified one, a writer’s purpose and the connections between the sentences can be unclear, as in this one:

(1)Firstly, the Olympic Games provide an outlet for competition. (2) Friendly competition among many countries occurs around the world. (3) Regardless of each country's financial situation, the competition is in the field of sports and not in politics. (4)It provides to people who have trained very hard a form or basis of comparison to others around the world, giving these competitors the opportunity to find out if they are the very best. (5)Also, along with providing an outlet for competition the Olympic Games creates a sense of nationalism. (6) Nationalist pride is always a component of the Olympics, each country having its representatives. (6) The Olympics unifies a country, giving its citizens something in common-- a victory-- that brings them together. (7) For example, the acquisition of a gold medal or a number of gold medals can be a source of national pride. (Adapted from a student paper, used with permission.)

Here, the topic sentence is about how the Olympic Games provide an outlet for competition, and in sentences (2), (3) and (4) the writer sticks to that idea. However, in sentence (5), she shifts focus to how the Olympic Games create a sense of nationalism. It's possible that this second idea is connected to the key concept in the topic sentence, but the writer doesn't make that connection, and as a result, the paragraph ends weakly with an example supporting the shift in topic. The writer never makes her point about how the Games provide a competitive outlet.

To achieve unity, begin with a clear topic sentence. This doesn't mean that it has to appear at the beginning of the paragraph, although a topic sentence usually does in academic writing. What is important however, is that the main idea or purpose, stated in the topic sentence, sets the agenda for the rest of the paragraph. Because the topic sentence provides the unifying idea, this sentence must be clear, concise and make a point about your thesis. You can think of it this way: a good topic sentence provides the bones of a paragraph that support the skin and muscle of all the sentences that follow. Once you know what point you want to introduce in your topic sentence, you can create a unified paragraph by making sure that all the rest of the sentences are clearly related to the first

one. For example, a paragraph might begin like this: “In the second chapter of the “Mountain People,” Turnbull (1972) uses an informal, colloquial writing style to involve his readers in the lives of the Ik people of Africa.” In this paragraph, to maintain unity, the remaining sentences should all relate to the central concepts in the topic sentence: Turnbull’s informal writing style and/or how that style involves his readers. A sentence that mentions the informal writing style of another author would be a digression and would destroy the unity of the paragraph. Thus, unity is created when the topic sentence makes a promise to readers, and all the other sentences fulfill that promise.

One way to ensure that your paragraphs have unity is to underline the subject of each supporting sentence to see if it points back to the key concepts in the topic sentence. In the topic sentence about the “Mountain People,” for example, you might have sentences that begin, “Turnbull’s word choice is more informal....” or “The author’s level of language...” In each case, the subject noun group relates to one of the main concepts in the topic sentence. If all of your sentence subjects develop one of the key concepts, chances are that you have a unified paragraph. If they don’t, you have probably digressed from your original purpose and must recast some sentences to get back on track.

[Click here for a sample of a unified paragraph](#)

[Click here for editing tips for unified paragraphs](#)

Development

Effective paragraphs are not only unified, they are fully developed, which means that they don’t leave any significant questions in readers’ minds. If you were drawing a map to show a fellow traveler how to get from a mountain pass to a source of water, you would be careful to draw a line that followed the trail down the mountain, along the valley to a spot where there was a lake. You wouldn’t stop the line halfway down the mountain, hoping that those who used your map would be able to figure out the rest of the way for themselves. Similarly, when you are writing a paragraph, you must be sure to trace the full development of your ideas for readers so they will understand the assumptions, evidence and reasoning you used. There are three ways to ensure that your paragraphs are fully developed: by providing the right level of supporting detail, choosing the right kind of evidence and choosing the right pattern of development for your purpose.

Developing paragraphs with the right *level* of detail

To fully develop the sub-topic of the essay’s main idea in a paragraph, you must provide your readers with details. It is not enough to make assertions. Your readers must understand fully how you reached your conclusion. What leads you to the conclusion you make in the paragraph? What texts and ideas do you refer to that influenced your thinking? What reasoning do you use? To make sure you’ve provided the right level of detail, try using the 5Ws to imagine what questions an informed reader might ask. Does your paragraph give enough detail to answer important *what* and *when* questions? Does it

answer *who, where, and why* questions? Although you will probably not have to address all of these, a fully developed paragraph provides enough supporting detail to answer questions any engaged, informed reader might ask.

Developing paragraphs with the right *kind* of detail

Not only is it important to provide enough detail for your readers, it's important to provide the right kind of detail, and that will depend on the purpose of your essay. The kind of detail will also depend on the demands of the assignment and the discipline you are writing in. For example, if you are asked to write a personal essay, your details might be examples of personal experiences. If you are asked to write a history paper, the "right" kind of details might come from your analysis of a historical text, and support in an argumentative essay might come from both analysis and reasoning.

Another way to think about choosing the right kind of detail is in terms of warm or cool proofs (Brundage, D. on Tarver, J., personal communication, March 17, 2008). Warm proofs are those that appeal to emotions, and they are what classical rhetoricians call appeals to *pathos*. On the other hand, cool proofs, like logical arguments and statistics, appeal to reason and are more in keeping with classical ideas of *logos*, or logical thought. If you think about choosing details in this way, then a history paper might use a combination of warm proofs (e.g., personal histories and letters from the historical era) in addition to the cool proofs (e.g. reasoning and logic). Again, the choice of detail will depend on your writing purpose, which flows from the demands of the assignment and the requirements of the discipline you are writing in.

In the example below, a writer explains how classical ideas of *pathos* can be used to enhance the persuasiveness of a message. As you read, consider the details the writer has chosen, and why she might have chosen those and not others:

Appeals to pathos, or what modern rhetoricians call emotional appeals, begin by making an audience more open to the message. Aristotle himself suggested this approach to persuasion in the Rhetoric when he stated that "(o)ur judgments when we are pleased and friendly are not the same as when we are pained and hostile" (as cited in Horner, 1988, p.57). In other words, Aristotle proposed that writers persuade, in part, by affecting the mood of their audience and by making them better disposed towards the message. To maximize this effect, writers need to know and identify with their audience. Are audience members all the same age, or a mixed

group? What socio-economic group are they likely to be part of? What is their level of education? Asking questions like these will help writers to know their audience's hopes and fears, and prepare the audience to be more sympathetic to the message (Horner, 1987).

In this paragraph, the writer has selected details from a text in the form of quotations and summary because she is trying to support her explanation of *pathos*. In doing so, she uses quotes from Aristotle, one of the founding fathers of rhetoric, and Horner, a well-respected modern rhetorician. Although this explanation would have been more persuasive if the writer had quoted more than one source, the kind of details she has provided are appropriate and convincing for her purpose.

Developing paragraphs with the right *pattern* of development

The particular kind of support you provide will depend largely on the pattern of development you use for your paragraph, which, in turn, depends on its purpose. If you are trying to make a point by telling a story, then you might use narrative. If the purpose is to explain, step by step, how something is done, then a process pattern might be better. The key is in selecting the right pattern of development, keeping in mind that you can use a variety of patterns in the same essay.

One way to think about different types of arrangements or patterns is on a continuum from the types most likely to be found in creative writing to the types found in analytical writing. On such a continuum, narration would be on the most creative end and cause and effect and definition on the analytical end:

Creative---Narration---Description---Process---Exemplification---
Comparison/Contrast---Definition---Cause and Effect---**Analytical**.

In academic writing, it's a good rule of thumb to use the more creative types of patterns sparingly, for a defined purpose and to rely more on analytical types of arrangements.

What follows is a list of different patterns with samples of each one; as you read, keep one point in mind. Although these classifications are ones that many books on writing and rhetoric use, the divisions between them are somewhat arbitrary and are not exclusive. In other words, a paragraph that uses definition as a method of development is also likely to use elements of cause/effect and process development; a paragraph of narration will likely use elements of description. Although the list is not exhaustive, it will give you an idea of some of the most commonly used patterns of development.

Narration -Because narrative paragraphs often focus on an experience or an event, they share features with both process and descriptive styles of development. Like process

paragraphs (described below), narrative uses transitions of time and space; like descriptive paragraphs, this pattern can use sensory words to develop ideas and be structured with the topic sentence near or at the end of the paragraph. The unique feature of this type of development is that it tells a story.

Although we were close, Samantha managed to hide her problem throughout Grade 11. I remember her saying that she had to watch what she ate to maintain her figure, but that wasn't unusual; almost everyone we knew was constantly on a diet, so when she'd bring only a piece of lettuce and a slice of tomato for lunch, I didn't think anything of it. I didn't find it unusual either that she spent a lot of time in the girl's washroom that year. Like any good friend, I accepted her explanation that she had picked up a flu that she couldn't shake. It wasn't until the beginning of Grade 12 that I began to suspect that something more serious might be wrong. I noticed that she looked more gaunt each week, and she complained of feeling weak and tired all the time. Even more disturbing, though, was the way she made excuses not to walk home with Kath and me. Eventually, she even stopped meeting us for lunch at Wu's Cafe. At first, I thought maybe she was on something, but when I stole peeks into her locker and her big saddle-bag purse, I never saw anything suspicious. Then, one day, we were in the girl's room, repairing our lipstick and I asked her, straight out what the problem was. She leaned on the sink with both hands, and hung her head, until her blonde hair shielded her face, and in a shaky voice she told all: the uncontrollable urges to eat anything, and the vomiting that always followed. With that simple statement, the

*wall of secrets Samantha had built between us over last year collapsed
and once again, we were friends. (adapted from a student essay with
permission.)*

Even though this paragraph does not start with a formal topic sentence, it is not difficult to find the theme—it's in the last sentence, which is a common pattern in narration. Notice, too, how events are organized according to time. The first sentence establishes the time frame of the story (*during Grade 11*), and traces some of the events during that year with use of past tense (*we were close; everyone we knew*, etc.) Then, the rest of the paragraph details events in chronological order. Transitions of time (*eventually, then, as soon as*) and sensory words (*gaunt, blonde, shaky*) help readers follow and visualize the events that form the backbone of this story.

Description- A descriptive pattern is characterized by vivid sensory description. It uses sense words (e.g., *bitter, light, bright, pungent, loud*) vivid action verbs, (e.g., *dive, drip, rip*) and transitions of space (e.g. *here, there, to the left, up*) to give sense impressions of a scene. This pattern is useful when you want to create a dominant sensory impression. In most academic work, you should use this arrangement with caution: many academic papers call for analysis and synthesis, and although description can contribute to that type of development, use it sparingly to make room for more analytical paragraphs.

Note that some instructors do not use the word *description* in this specialized way but in a more general sense to mean “paraphrase” or “define.” Thus, whenever your instructor asks you to “describe” or use description in your essay, it's a good idea to check to see what she means by description.

[Click here for samples of descriptive paragraphs](#)

Process- A process arrangement is usually used to explain a process or how to do something. It uses transitions of enumeration (e.g., *first, second, third*) and/or time (e.g., *then, next, finally*) and is the right pattern of development when your purpose is to help your readers understand the steps in a process or procedure or to give instructions. For full development, a process paragraph relies on clear communication of the instruction or steps to your readers.

[Click here for a sample of a process paragraph](#)

Exemplification- This pattern uses examples (or one longer, extended example) to support the topic sentence and is useful when your most convincing support is a number of pertinent examples. With this pattern, you provide proof of a more general statement (the topic sentence) with the weight of the specific instances (supporting details).

[Click here for a sample of a paragraph developed by exemplification](#)

Comparison/Contrast- This pattern of development is useful when you want to help readers understand a concept by pointing out similarities and differences between it and another concept. The comparison is usually developed either by analyzing all features of one concept and then comparing them to the features of the other (a block comparison method) or by analyzing each point of comparison (a point-by-point method). Keep in mind that the comparison is simply a means to an end and that the conclusion of the paragraph should be **drawn from** your comparison.

[Click here for a sample of a comparison/contrast paragraph](#)

Definition- A paragraph of definition aims to give a complete, working definition of a term, concept or idea in your paper. One of the central features of this pattern is that it tells both what the term is and what it isn't, that is, it defines the boundaries of a term so your readers can better understand it. This pattern is useful when you are introducing new or specialized terms to your readers, or when you need to define a key concept in your thesis. For example, if you were writing a paper to explain the role that propaganda played in the Nazi takeover of Germany, you might begin by defining the key features of propaganda *as they relate to the thesis of the paper*.

Some rhetoricians, such as Winifred Horner (1988), suggest a classical approach to defining terms. In this approach, the term is named and the class to which it belongs is determined. Then, the differences between the term and others in its class are named. Thus, if you were defining *propaganda*, you might place it in the larger class of communicative acts, which would include advertisements, reports, and magazine articles and then try to determine what differentiates propaganda from these other types of communication. Through this analysis, you could come up with an “essential definition” (Horner, 1988, p.80) of the term that might look like this: *propaganda is mass communication that deceives or distorts truth to further political goals*.

[Click here for a sample of a paragraph developed by definition](#)

Cause and Effect- Cause and effect paragraphs analyze the causes or the effects of something or the relationship between both. If you want to explain the “why” of something—a process, an event, a concept—then this is a useful pattern. In this pattern, transitions of logic (e.g., *thus, therefore, consequently, as a result*) and words and phrases of cause and effect (e.g., *because, for the reason that, given that, in effect*) feature prominently. Be careful, however, when you make statements about cause and effect. If there is more than one cause to a particular effect, be sure not to restrict your analysis or explanation. On the other hand, if there is more than one effect, be sure not to assume they all arose from the same cause. To be sure there is a connection between the causes and effects you are analyzing or explaining, ask questions like “Is this the only thing that could cause this effect?” and “Is this the only possible effect this cause could have?” and “Was this cause sufficient to result in this effect?” (Horner, 1988, p.127).

[Click here for samples of cause and effect paragraphs](#)

Paragraph Length

You might be wondering, “how do I know when to start a new paragraph?” or “how long should a paragraph be?” Usually, these questions are related to how well paragraphs are developed and unified, and essentially, there is no one, right answer. In extreme cases, you might find a paragraph as short as one sentence or as long as a page if it achieves the writer’s purpose. However, most paragraphs fall somewhere between these two extremes, and while there are no hard and fast rules, there are a few principles you can use to determine proper paragraph length:

1. The paragraph should be long enough to fully develop your topic.
2. The paragraph should focus on one topic
3. The paragraph length should support the effect you are trying to create. Keep in mind that longer paragraphs slow readers down and shorter paragraphs are easier and quicker to read.
4. A paragraph of over 12 sentences in an academic essay *probably* needs to be divided.
5. A paragraph of 5 or fewer sentences in an academic essay *probably* needs to be developed further or combined with another paragraph.
6. Paragraph length can vary greatly from discipline to discipline.

Coherence

You’ve achieved coherence in a paragraph when a reader (usually an instructor) congratulates you on good “flow.” A paragraph that is coherent flows because it is arranged according to a definite plan, and as a result, all the sentences are not just about the same main topic, but they also “stick together” and lead readers smoothly from the topic sentence to the concluding one. This “stickiness” results from sentences that follow, one from the other, in a way that makes sense. Each sentence takes a logical step forward. There are a number of ways to achieve coherence: through use of ordering principles, pronouns, transitional words, and repetition.

Using an ordering principle to achieve coherence

One way to achieve the flow of coherence is to decide on an ordering principle for the ideas in your paragraph. This means that there is a pattern of development that creates a logical flow between the sentences. For example, the first paragraph under the title “Types of Paragraphs in a Basic Essay” uses enumeration to list the different types of paragraphs. **Narrative** paragraphs use a chronological ordering principle and usually relate events connected by time. You’ll usually find narrative paragraphs using transitions of time 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. For more on choosing the right ordering principle, see the section on **paragraph development**.

Using pronouns to achieve coherence

Another way to help achieve coherence is to use pronouns to refer to nouns in previous sentences in the paragraph, thus “sticking” the sentences together. For example, if you refer to *people* in one sentence you can “point back” to that noun in the next sentence by using the pronoun *them*. In this case, *people* is the antecedent of the pronoun *them*.

A word of caution about using pronouns: make sure it is clear what noun (antecedent) the pronoun is pointing to or you could cause confusion instead of coherence. Consider these two sentences, for example: *Turnbull chooses words that could be found in any newspaper. Like a newspaper reporter, he writes it so most readers at a grade nine level could read it.*

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 making the antecedent of the pronoun clear: *Turnbull chooses words that could be found in any newspaper. Like a newspaper reporter, he picks them to make his work readable at a grade nine level.* In the edited version, the pronoun “them” clearly refers to the antecedent, “words” and creates a connection between the two sentences.

Another thing to remember about using pronouns to create coherence is to use them judiciously. Just as a vague reference can create confusion, so can using too many pronouns in a paragraph. In this paragraph, notice how the numerous pronouns combine to make the writer’s meaning unclear: *In addition, Turnbull chooses words that could be found in any newspaper. Like a newspaper reporter, 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.*

In this case, even though most of the pronouns refer to a noun in a previous sentence, the sheer number of pronouns makes the whole piece, well, incoherent.

Using transitional words and phrases to achieve coherence

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 [this link](#) for more lists of transitional words and phrases.

When you use transitional words and phrases, it can be tempting to stick one or two in without thinking about the meaning, but this can result in confusion instead of flow.. Thus, make sure that the link you have created between your sentences is a clear and logical one. If you write “therefore,” for example, make sure that the sentence that follows does, in fact, flow logically from the previous one; if you write “similarly,” make

sure that there is, in fact, similarity between the two ideas. Remember, too, that transitions can come not only at the beginning of a sentence but also in the middle, as the word “too” does in this sentence.

Using repetition to achieve coherence

Most developing writers are taught to avoid repetition, and this is good advice to a point. However, 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. For example, suppose a key concept in a thesis statement was that of “mythical structures in literature.” Throughout the essay, a writer might use a number of synonyms, such as “myth,” “mythical forms,” “configurations,” or “patterns” to refer to this concept. In addition, the writer might repeat these phrases and the original one, “mythical structures” throughout the paper. The key to using repetition of words and phrases effectively is to keep your readers in mind. If you use too little variation, they will be bored. If you use too many terms, your readers could easily become confused. A good rule of thumb is to 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 here for a sample of a coherent paragraph**](#)

[**Click here for editing tips to achieve coherent paragraphs**](#)

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Acknowledgements: Thanks to all the students who generously allowed their writing to be used as samples in this resource. Also, many thanks to David Brundage, Adien Dubbelboer, Melanie Klingbeil, Karen Overbye and Tunde Tuzes for their advice and contributions.