

# Some writing exercises to improve coherence and clarity

DD3001

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What is paper about and who is going to read it?

# Who are your readers?

Write down the names of *five real people*. The list should include:

- A top expert in your field (someone you would really like to impress)
- A close colleague in your discipline
- An academic colleague from outside your discipline
- An advanced undergraduate in your discipline
- A non academic friend, relative, or neighbour.

# What do you want to tell them?

For each person on the list:

- Write a sentence describing the problem (area) your paper addresses.
- Write a sentence reviewing the main idea(s) of your paper.
- Write a sentence for the main contributions of your paper.

# Play around with point of view

- What would your research story sound like if it were told by one of your research rivals.

## Global Coherence

Three features that help readers create **local coherence** in short passages:

- A sentence introducing the passage states at its end the key concepts that run through the rest of the passage.
- All the sentences that follow observe the principle of old then new information.
- Collectively, their *topics* focus on a few characters.

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A formula to help achieve global coherence:

- Begin each major section and subsection with a short, easily grasped segment that
  - states the point and
  - introduces the rest (the part that is longer and more complex).

Readers like to see four things:

- **Your readers must know where one section stops and the next one begins.**
- Readers must recognize a short segment that introduces each section and subsection
- At the end of that introductory segment, readers look for the sentence that states the point of the section, a statement that you expand on in the rest of that unit.
- Toward the end of that point sentence, they must see words that express the concepts that you develop in the rest of that unit.

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## Example of paragraph missing this structure

*Thirty sixth-grade students wrote essays that were analyzed to determine the effectiveness of eight weeks of training to distinguish fact from opinion. That ability is an important aspect of making sound arguments of any kind. In an essay written before instruction began, the writers failed almost completely to distinguish fact from opinion. In an essay written after four weeks of instruction, the students visibly attempted to distinguish fact from opinion, but did so inconsistently. In three more essays, they distinguished fact from opinion more consistently, but never achieved the predicted level. In a final essay written six months after instruction ended, they did no better than they did in their pre-instruction essay. Their training had some effect on their writing during the instruction period, but it was inconsistent, and six months after instruction it had no measurable effect.*

*In this study, thirty six-grade students were taught to distinguish fact from opinion. They did so during the instruction, but the effect was **inconsistent, less than predicted, and six months after instruction ended, the instruction had no measurable effect.** In an essay written before instruction began, the writers failed almost completely to distinguish fact from opinion. In an essay written after four weeks of instruction, the students visibly attempted to distinguish fact from opinion, but did so inconsistently. In three more essays, they distinguished fact from opinion more consistently, but never achieved the predicted level. In a final essay written six months after instruction ended, they did no better than they did in their pre-instruction essay. We thus conclude that short-term training to distinguish fact from opinion has no consistent or long term effect.*



# Does your paper have global coherence?

1. Circle the introductory segment of each section.
2. Circle the sentence/sentences summarizing the point of every section.
3. If you read these *summarizing sentences* in sequence do you get a coherent summary of your paper?

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# Improving your global coherence

1. Segments that introduce major sections should be separate paragraphs.
2. The **point sentence** for each unit should be close to or at the end of each of those introductory segments.
3. Each point sentence should state at its end the key concepts that run through what follows.
4. When read in sequence, those point sentences along with the main point should coherently summarize your whole document.

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  - Write a short introductory paragraph for each section incorporating your point sentence.



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# Two more requirements for coherence

- **Readers must see how everything in a section or whole is relevant to its point.**
  - Sentences are relevant to a point when they offer these:
    - \* background or context
    - \* reasons supporting a point
    - \* evidence, facts, or data supporting a reason
    - \* an explanation of reasoning or methods
    - \* consideration of other points of view

# Two more requirements for coherence

- **Readers must see the principle behind the order of your document's parts.**
  - Readers also want to see the principal behind the order of the parts.
  - Readers look for 3 kinds of order:
    - \* **Chronological:** earlier → later, as a narrative or as a cause and effect. Signal time with *first, then, finally*; signal cause and effect with *as a result, because of that,...*
    - \* **Coordinate:** Paragraphs/sections/subsections equally support a point. Order these sections by importance, complexity and so on. Signal the order with phrases such as *first, second,..* or *also, another, in addition, ...*
    - \* **Logical:** an example → generalization (or vice versa), premise and conclusion (or vice versa), or by assertion and contradiction.

# Analyzing your paper's global coherence

- How would classify the ordering of your paper's sections?
- Pick a section and summarize the *evidence* presented in each paragraph to support your point.
- How would you classify the ordering of your *evidence*?
- Could your argument be made more coherent/stronger by a re-ordering of the evidence?
- If yes, what is this ordering?

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Improving the coherence of your paragraphs

# Coherence in a paragraph: Diagnosis

- Identify a paragraph in your paper which you would like to revise to make clearer.

To help you do this you can cut and paste paragraphs into the website <http://www.writersdiet.com/WT.php> and look for *flabby* passages. Flabbiness may indicate that your thinking was a bit confused when you wrote the passage.

- Underline the first 7 or 8 words of every sentence in the passage.
- If you can, underline the first 5 or 6 words of every clause in those sentences, both subordinate and main.

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Answer these questions:

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

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# Coherence in a paragraph: Rewrite

Now re-write the paragraph

- In most of your sentences, use subjects to name their topics.
- Put those subjects close to the beginning of the sentences.

Improving the cohesion of your sentences



# Cohesion of the sentences in your paragraph

Now try to make your paragraph read cohesively:

- Rewrite your sentences so that they begin with information familiar to your reader
- and the sentences end with information that readers cannot anticipate.
- Use the Writer's diet to re-write your original paragraph until it is fit and trim.
- Write your original and your two re-written paragraphs onto a fresh piece of paper (in no pre-set order). Swap this page with your neighbour. Let him order the paragraphs according to clarity.

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Concision in your writing

# Does your writing contain redundancy?

## **Example:**

*Critics cannot avoid employing complex and abstract technical terms if they are to successfully analyze literary texts and discuss them in a meaningful way.*

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## **Example:**

*Critics cannot avoid employing complex and abstract technical terms if they are to successfully analyze literary texts and discuss them in a meaningful way.*

## **Revision of example:**

*Critics must use technical terms to analyze literary texts meaningfully.*

# Impose some concision on your writing

Pick a section then:

- Delete every adverb and every adjective before a noun, then restore only those that readers need to understand the passage. Does it read better?
- Identify words that mean little or nothing. Delete them.
- Identify words that repeat the meaning of other words. Delete one of the words to avoid redundancy.
- Identify words implied by other words. Delete them.
- Change negatives to affirmatives.

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# Can you reduce the meta-discourse in your paper?

- Find a sentence in your paper that announce a topic rather than state a thesis.
- Delete the meta-discourse and re-write what remains.
- Then decide whether the full statement makes a claim that readers would want to read about.

## **Example:**

*The relationship between birth order and academic success will be explored.*

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## **Example:**

*The relationship between birth order and academic success will be explored.*

## **Revision of example:**

*Does birth order relate to academic success?*

**or**

*Birth order may influence academic success.*

Exercises for introduction writing / global coherence

Think of how you could begin your paper with one of the following opening ploys:

- a personal anecdote
- an anecdote drawn from your research
- a challenging question

Remember an attention grabbing-hook must match the content and purpose of your article/paper.

# Create a Research Space (CARS)

- Establish your research area has some significance.
- Selectively summarize the previous research.
- Show the reported research is not complete.
- Turn the gap into the research space of the present paper.

Can you briefly sketch out a *CARS* introduction for your last/current research paper.