

Flow



Flow means different things to different people, but if conversations in the Writing Center are any gauge, it generally means a sense of connection, whether that's from one sentence to the next, one paragraph to the next, or for an essay as a whole. You might see people refer to flow in handbooks as unity or coherence/cohesion. Whatever the term, being able to control that sense of connection can make your writing more effective.

The Known-New Contract

Also called the given-new principle, the known-new contract is this: put familiar information (the known) near the front of the sentence and new information toward (or at) the end. Doing this creates a chain that leads the reader smoothly from one thought to the next. Look at the following example from Joseph Williams' *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*:

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. (Williams 55)

You might notice, especially if you read it aloud, that the passage sounds "choppy." The known-new contract suggests that you should start a sentence right where you left off with the previous one. The writer of the above passage has not done that. Now here's the same passage slightly rewritten. Notice how just rearranging the second sentence brings like information together and makes the passage sound better:

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. (Williams 55)

Most readers would say that the passage "flows" well. This is because it follows the known-new contract. The first sentence ends by introducing the subject of **black holes**. And the next sentence starts with the same subject (**A black hole**) before introducing new information about them: that they are *no larger than a marble*. The third sentence begins by talking about that tiny size before introducing new information about how black holes change space. If there were a fourth sentence, you might expect it to start like this: "The strangest of these changes is...."

Other Ways to Keep the Flow

There are other strategies you can use to help guide your readers smoothly through your text. Here are a few of the most common ones.

- **Repetition**

Repeat key words or phrases throughout a paragraph to make it coherent. Such repetition keeps the paragraph and the reader focused. Of course, you may worry about reusing the same words over and over, so incorporate pronouns as well.

- **Variation**

Words related to your key words or topic can also serve as a kind of repetition without being monotonous. (For example, if you're writing about revision, words like "change" and "rewriting" are along similar lines, so your readers will be able to follow your thought.) Be careful, however, to not just replace words for the sake of replacing them. Sometimes the first word that comes to mind is best. Even so, it's difficult to entirely avoid repeating specific words.

- **Reference Words**

These words link concepts mentioned in the previous sentence. Examples include: this, that, these, those, such, he, she, it, his, her, and their. A good habit to cultivate is using these words connected to a noun rather than on their own. (Ex: "This approach leads to..." is clearer than "This leads to..." See Vague Pronouns handout.)

- **Parallelism**

Sentences with similar structure emphasize the relation between sentences, like with the following:
Flying is fast, safe, and convenient. However, it is not comfortable, cheap, or relaxing.

- **Transitions**

Transitional words and phrases connect ideas together, showing their relationship. They are like bridges between parts of your paper. Look at these two sample passages, one without clear transitions and one with them:

In "The Fly," Katherine Mansfield tries to show us the "real" personality of "the boss" beneath his exterior. The fly helps her to portray this real self. The boss goes through a range of emotions and feelings.

In "The Fly," Katherine Mansfield tries to show us the "real" personality of "the boss" beneath his exterior. The fly *in the story's title* helps her to portray this real self. *In the course of the story*, the boss goes through a range of emotions and feelings.

- **Paragraph Unity**

Each paragraph should focus on one main idea, often expressed in a topic sentence, and each sentence should relate to the topic sentence. Topic sentences may be implied, and they may not necessarily begin a paragraph.

- **Paragraph Structure**

The writer often knows why each sentence belongs in its chosen place; the reader, however, has no such knowledge. It's up to the writer, then, to arrange the material in a logical fashion the reader can follow. Using these schemes as appropriate will help the reader follow your ideas and avoid confusion. Some common ways to organize paragraphs include general to specific and specific to general. Other organizational patterns include:

Spacial: Often used in descriptions. Decide whether you want to describe something from top to bottom, left to right, or near to far.

Chronological: Used when you want to describe sequences of events, as in a historical summary or a lab report.

Climactic: Use when trying to hold a reader's interest. Arrange your ideas in order of increasing importance, so you end with something surprising or exciting.

- **Metadiscourse**

Metadiscourse is a word or phrase that the writer uses in order to tell readers how sentences or ideas connect to each other. They are sign-posts that explicitly guide readers through the text and show the relationships between your ideas. Examples of metadiscourse include *in other words*, *in addition*, *however*, *in fact*, *in the first place*, *next*, *finally*, *in conclusion*, *in contrast*, *on the other hand*, *similarly* and many more. Using these helps you make the connections between your ideas clear.

Resources:

Aaron, Jane E. *The Little, Brown Compact Handbook with Exercises*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2007.

Howard, Rebecca Moore. *Writing Matters: A Handbook for Writing and Research*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011.

Johnson-Sheehan, Richard, and Charles Paine. *Writing Today*. Brief Edition. Boston: Longman, 2010.

Lunsford, Andrea A. *Easy Writer: A Pocket Reference*. Fourth Edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010.

Lunsford, Andrea A. *The St. Martin's Handbook*. Seventh Edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011.

Maimon, Elaine P., Janice H. Peritz, and Kathleen Blake Yancey. *A Writer's Resource: A Handbook for Writing and Research*. Third Edition. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2010.

Williams, Joseph. *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*. New York: Pearson Education, 2006.