

# Cohesion

## Cohesion in Academic Writing

Good writing needs to be as clear as possible so that the reader can easily follow sentences, ideas and details. One of the most important aspects is to show the connections and relationships between ideas. Using particular types of words and phrases, known as 'cohesive devices', to link individual sentences and parts of sentences, helps the reader to follow the movement of ideas without any difficulty. They help the writing to flow naturally, without unnecessary repetition.

### 1. Referring backwards

The reader needs to know *who* and *what* is being referred to in a passage of text. But it's not good to repeat the same phrase too often, so we use words such as

- *it, he, she, they* etc. (pronouns)
- *this, that* (demonstratives),
- *the* (definite article)
- *previously*

to refer back to people /things mentioned earlier in the text.

*Example:* The Australian prime minister has called an early election. *The date* was selected to coincide with the start of the Olympic Games. *This decision* was based on the views of *his* ministerial advisors, who predicted that voter confidence in the government's policies would be strong at this time. ... As *previously* mentioned, decisions on the timing of elections are based on predictions of voter confidence in the existing government.

*Comment:* *The date* refers back to an early election. *This decision* refers to the prime minister having called an early election. *His* refers to the Australian prime minister. *As previously mentioned* refers to all of the earlier information about the selection of election dates.

### 2. Looking forwards

We often use words and phrases warning the reader to expect new information. This helps make a smooth transition from one point to another. Such phrases include: *the following, as follows, below, next, subsequently*

*Example (i)* The *following* dates have been proposed for the forthcoming election: September 8, September 15 and 3 October.

*Example (ii)* The results of the analysis of voter confidence are shown in Table 1 *below*.



*Example (iii)* The *next* issue to be discussed is the influence of the media on voter confidence in the government.

### 3. Repetition and avoiding repetition

To keep the reader aware of the focus of attention, we sometimes repeat the same word or phrase. But we also try to avoid too much repetition by using words and phrases with similar meaning (synonyms).

*Example:* The government's election *campaign commenced* with a media blitz outlining a series of election promises. This *beginning* to the *campaign* sparked numerous media commentaries.

*Comment:* The word *campaign* repeated in the second sentence continues the topic of the first. Replacing *commenced* with *beginning* adds variety but also keeps a focus on the topic of attention.

### 4. Transitional devices/Connecting words

Academic writing usually deals with complex ideas. To enable the reader to follow your thoughts and the connections between them, they need to be clearly and smoothly linked. To join ideas and sentences, we use a number of connecting words and phrases, such as the following few examples:

- and, but, so (to add, contrast, show cause and effect)
- although, because, whilst (to qualify, show cause and effect, signal concurrency)

*Example:* *Although* the government was elected for a three-year term, the Prime Minister decided to hold an early election. *Meanwhile*, the opposition parties, which had anticipated this move, had been planning their own election campaigns, *but* they had not expected such immediate public support.

### 5. Repeated/parallel structures

Repeated (or parallel) grammatical structures often indicate that statements are closely related.

*Example (i):* When editing your writing, notice what you have repeated, what you have omitted and what you have not expressed clearly. (Notice how *what* is repeated here.)

*Example (ii):* As President Kennedy once said: 'And so, my fellow Americans: Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.' (Notice how Kennedy changed the order of *ask, you, can* and *do* in the last part of the sentence – thus emphasising his point.)

#### **Example:**

The following passage in the centre column shows how the various cohesive forms work. The cohesive forms are in bold, and explained in the columns on the left and right.

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <p>1. This parallel list of plural nouns – <i>books, lectures, tutorials</i> – emphasises the similarity of these things</p> | <p>Most people in the English-speaking world used to think that the student's mind is an empty bucket to be filled by <b>books, lectures and tutorials</b>.<sup>1</sup> <b>Nowadays</b><sup>2</sup>, physiologists <b>and</b><sup>2</sup> psychologists tell us that the brain doesn't work in <b>this</b><sup>3</sup> passive, accepting manner.</p> | <p>2. <i>Nowadays</i> – a connective word to signal the present, in contrast to the past, <i>used to think</i>, in the first sentence. <i>and</i> – also a connective signals addition</p> <p>3. <i>this</i> - refers back to the idea of an empty bucket to be filled by books etc.</p> |
|--|---|--|

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| <p>5 <i>to learn, to write, to make sense</i> – parallel structures, using the infinitive form of the verb, emphasise the links between ideas</p> <p>6. <i>first</i> – a connective to signal the start of a sequence</p> <p>8. <i>certain</i> – repetition of a word to emphasise the point</p> <p>9. <i>all of which</i> – relative phrase referring back to certain preconceptions etc.</p> | <p><b>On the contrary</b><sup>4</sup>, <b>to learn</b> and <b>to write</b><sup>5</sup> is, <b>first</b><sup>6</sup>, <b>to make sense</b><sup>5</sup> for ourselves of our new experience in terms of our old. <b>So</b><sup>7</sup> you need to be aware at the outset that, even to subjects you have never studied before, you can bring <b>certain</b> preconceptions, a <b>certain</b><sup>8</sup> amount of knowledge, and a <b>certain</b><sup>8</sup> facility with language – <b>all of which</b><sup>9</sup> can get you started. The most baffling of essay topics can soon yield some meaning if you take the initiative and begin to ask questions - <b>of yourself, of the essay topic, of your books and lectures, and of the department you are writing for</b>.<sup>10</sup></p> <p>Adapted from G. Taylor (1989) <i>The Student's Writing Guide for the Arts and Social Sciences</i>.</p> | <p>4. <i>on the contrary</i> - coordinating phrase to signal a contrasting idea</p> <p>7. <i>so</i> - coordinating connective to signal consequence</p> <p>10. <i>of yourself</i> etc - parallel structure of + noun phrase</p> |
|--|---|---|

## Common errors

| Examples of common errors  | Explanation and suggested version   |
|--|---|
| <p><i>Overusing connectives</i></p> <p>Example: If people stopped drinking, they might be able to prevent liver cirrhosis. <b>However</b>, governments permit the production and sale of alcohol. <b>So</b>, the government should help in preventing this disease. <b>Nevertheless</b>, government resources are limited.</p> | <p>It is important not to use too many connectives and to vary their position in sentences i.e. not always at the start of sentences. Example: If people stopped drinking, they might be able to prevent liver cirrhosis. The government should help in preventing this disease <b>because</b> they permit the production and sale of alcohol. Government resources, <b>however</b>, are limited.</p> |
| <p><i>Missing subordinators</i></p> <p>Example: She went to work. Although she</p>   | <p>Subordinators (although, because, whilst, while) cannot be used with only one</p>  |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| felt sick.  | clause. They join two clauses together<br>Example: <b>Although</b> she felt sick, she went to work.   |
| <i>Faulty parallel structures</i><br>Example: Houses play an important role not only to provide a place to live, but also for giving a sense of security. | You need to use parallel forms with the expression 'Not only...but also'. In this case, to provide and to give. Example: Houses play an important role not only <b>to provide</b> a place to live, but also <b>to give</b> a sense of security. |

## Exercise 1:

Analyse the following paragraph for cohesion (reference, conjunctions and parallel structures). An answer is provided below.

### The Wind and the Sun

The Wind said to the Sun, "I am much stronger than you." "You are not," replied the Sun. "I can prove my strength," said the Wind. "See that man? I will blow off his hat and coat. Watch me do it now!" He blew with all his might, but the harder he blew the more the man wrapped his coat around him. Then the Sun had a turn. His happy beams calmed the air, warmed the earth and made the man feel so hot that he took off his hat and coat. It is better to be gentle than rough.

Aesop's Fables, 1967

## Strategies to improve cohesion

1. Select a piece of writing (textbook or journal articles) from your area of study.
2. Take a paragraph and underline all the different forms of cohesion used (reference, connectives and parallel structures)
3. Which forms are the most common?
4. Choose a couple that you think are effective and practise using them in your own writing.
5. Try to use a variety of ways to show the relationship between your ideas.

## Useful references on cohesion

Taylor, G. (1989). *The Student's Writing Guide for the Arts and Social Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Jordan, R.R. (1990). *Academic Writing Course*. London: Collins.

## Answers to Exercise 1:

### The Wind and the Sun

1. Reference

The Wind – I – you – my - the wind – I – me – He - his might - He

The Sun - the Sun - the Sun - his

That man - his - his - him - the man - he -his

Blow off his hat and coat - it

2. Connectives

and, but, then

3. Parallel structures

calmed the air, warmed the earth, made the man – past tense verb phrase