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Revising for Coherence & Unity

Writers often want to know if their writing “flows.” When writers refer to “flow,” they sometimes are referring to the writing process itself. You may have heard yourself or others say that a particular project “flowed” easily. Usually, when writers say this, they mean that they had an easy time completing the project. Sometimes, however, when writers use the word “flow” they really are asking a question about the paper’s organization. They want to know if the ideas they are writing about are well connected. They want to know if the reader can easily follow the paper’s logic.

This handout is designed to help writers improve the “flow” of their papers in the area of organization. The following guide will help writers revise for organization by offering some basic vocabulary to help you understand what “flow” means; by offering some specific strategies for testing & improving “flow”; and by offering a list of transitional words that can improve “flow.”

1. A Revision of the Term “Flow”

The term “flow” is a rather imprecise way of describing a paper’s organization. In every day life, we often use the term flow to describe how water moves. In the spring, water in rivers “flows” quickly and often erratically. In the summer, river “flow” is often stagnant or stands still. In all these cases, “flow” describes the water’s movement, but does not capture *how* it moves. The term “flow” also doesn’t describe how ideas are connected.

In applying “flow” to essay writing, it is important to be more specific about the kind of smooth movement and clear connections the writer seeks to create. The terms **coherence** and **unity** better and describe this sense of smoothness and connection. Coherence refers to the logical order of a paper. A coherent paper helps readers move from beginning to end smoothly. Unity refers to how material in a paper is connected. Paragraphs in a unified paper work together to support one main point.

2. Testing for Unity and Coherence

2A. Test for Coherence in the Whole Paper

1. Highlight every paragraph transition.
2. Highlight “directions” to the reader.
3. Put a slash (/) in front of paragraphs that lack transitions or directions.

2B. Test for Coherence in Paragraphs

1. Highlight every transition word.
2. Highlight “directions” to the reader.
3. Put a slash (/) in front of sentences that lack transitions or directions.

2C. Improving Coherence in the Whole Paper or in Paragraphs

1. Go back to the slash marks you made in 2A or 2B
2. Decide what transitions or directions you need to add (see section 3).
3. Add directions or transitions.

2D. Test for Unity in the Whole Paper

1. Highlight the paper's thesis statement.
2. Find the key point of each paragraph.
3. Write down a brief key word or phrase for each main point.
4. Ask yourself: *How well does each idea support your focus?*
5. Write down what you discovered.

2F. Improving Unity in the Whole Paper

1. Look at what you discovered in 2D.
2. Decide whether all your paragraphs related to the paper's thesis.
3. Cut unrelated material or re-write thesis to account for this material.

(For more information about thesis or paragraphs, see the center's handouts on "Developing a Thesis" or "Paragraph Development.")

3. Types of Transitions or Directions to Use When Improving Coherence

You are adding an idea

and, or, nor, also, moreover, furthermore, indeed, in fact, first, second, in addition

You are showing consequences

therefore, thus, so, and so, hence, consequently, finally, on the whole, all in all, in other words, in short

To tell the reader you are qualifying

frequently, occasionally, in particular, in general, specifically, especially, if, unless, in case

To tell the reader you are reversing a line of thought

still, nevertheless, notwithstanding

You are discussing a time relationship

after a short time, afterwards, as long as, as soon as, at last, before, earlier, later, etc.

You are summarizing

in brief, in conclusion, in short, on the whole, to conclude, to sum up

2E. Test for Unity in Paragraphs

1. Highlight the main point of each paragraph (if you find several, highlight each in a different color).
2. Look at each paragraph out of order or at random.
3. Ask yourself: *How well does each paragraph support one idea?*
4. Write down what you discovered.

2G. Improving Unity in Paragraphs

1. Look at what you discovered in 2E.
2. Decide whether all your ideas are relevant and support your topic sentences.
3. Cut unrelated material, create a new paragraph, or move this material.

You are expanding on an idea

for instance, for example, for one thing, similarly, likewise

You are discussing causes and effects

accordingly, as a result, consequently, in short, otherwise, then, therefore, thus, truly

To admit to an opposing point

of course, no doubt, doubtless, to be sure, granted (that), certainly

You are returning to your line of thought

but, however, yet, on the contrary, not at all, surely, no

You are making a concession

after all, although, this may be true, at the same time, even though, admittedly, naturally, of course

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