Writing Better Paragraphs

IMPROVING CLARITY & FLUIDITY IN ACADEMIC WRITING
Writing Better Paragraphs

Often, inexperienced academic writers will claim that the problem with their writing is that they write *like they speak*, which makes their writing sound immature and non-academic.

But the bigger issue is that they write *as they think*, without taking the time to review and revise their paragraphs to improve clarity and fluidity. This handout is meant to help both inexperienced and experienced writers identify specific problems they can look for and revise to improve their paragraphs.
Clarity & Fluidity in a Researched Argument

A researched argument is a presentation of the author’s response to an issue, explained and defended for an academic audience.

That academic audience might be general or it might be specific to a discipline or field of expertise. But because it is intended for an academic audience, a researched argument follows academic conventions for clear and fluid communication.
Academic Conventions for Clarity & Fluidity

- An Abstract
- An Introduction
- An Argument Organized with
  - Sections & Section Headings
  - Transitional Phrases & Paragraphs
  - Paragraphs & Topic Sentences
  - Parenthetical, In-Text Citations
- An Argument Supported by
  - Academic Argument Strategies
  - Empirical & Accurate Evidence
- A Conclusion
- A References List
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This handout will focus on the conventions related to writing better paragraphs.

But do not forget to include the argument strategies that help avoid confusion and misunderstanding: clarifications, concessions, & rebuttals.
Sections

**Clarity:** Word Choice, Sentence Structure, & Paragraphing

**Fluidity:** Organization & Transition

**The Paragraph:** One Main Idea & One Primary Purpose

**Topic Sentences:** Identifying the Main Idea

**Transitions:** Connecting My Ideas with Transitional Phrases & Paragraphs

**In-Class Exercises**
Improving Clarity

WORD CHOICE
Word Choice

Which paragraph below best avoids confusion and misunderstanding:

**PARAGRAPH #1**

Academic writers need to use words that readers understand. This might sound easy to do when writing to an academic audience with a large vocabulary. However, even if readers understand what a word means, the way the word is used can still create confusion. Writers need to understand why this happens and know how to avoid it.

**PARAGRAPH #2**

Academic writers’ diction must be comprehended by readers. One might assume that communicating to an academic audience would facilitate this endeavor. However, denotations, connotations, and other idiomatic nuances obscure unambiguous communication. Writers must anticipate and address such linguistic opacity.
Word Choice

It’s important to point out that, in terms of word choice, both paragraphs have their strengths and weaknesses.

**Paragraph #1** uses words that are most likely to be understood by anyone reading them, but it also uses words that are less concise and specific.

**Paragraph #2** uses words that are less well-known by a general academic audience, perhaps, but it also uses words that are more concise and specific.

Academic writers need to use words that readers understand. This might sound easy to do when writing to an academic audience with a large vocabulary. However, even if readers understand what a word means, the way the word is used can still create confusion. Writers need to understand why this happens and know how to avoid it.

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Word Choice: Denotations & Connotations

Sometimes a word’s denotation (dictionary definition) is just what is needed to communicate an idea, but its connotation (culturally associated definition) makes an impression we did not intend.

To be clear in academic writing writers need to be aware of both the denotations and connotations of the words we choose.

**Inaccurate Denotations**
- An older professor referring to her college students as her kids.

**Insensitive Connotations**
- Using the word overweight instead of *fat* or *thin* instead of *skinny*. 
Revising Word Choice: Denotations & Connotations

Recognizing words that have different denotations and connotations requires me to have a strong vocabulary and to avoid using words that I don’t know very well. I can generally avoid problems by using words and language that is similar to the academic sources I have been reading as part of my research project.

Unfortunately, to identify words that I am using that I should consider revising, I have to skim through my sentences and paragraphs looking for them. There are no shortcuts, other than to look at my notes, drafts, and outlines to identify words that I’ve been using frequently without thinking much about whether or not they are the best words for me to use in an academic researched argument.

I may not have to use a different word if I can define or clarify the word I am using. As long as I do so, I can avoid creating confusion for my readers.
Word Choice: Thick & Thin Words

Other times, a word may have an unclear or vague meaning: good, bad, beneficial, negative, satisfactory, healthy, important, technology, media, etc.

In these cases, an intended audience is probably familiar with a word, but because the author has a specific meaning in mind he/she needs to define that word.

- A professor telling a student that his/her writing is good or bad, doesn’t really communicate much other than approval or disapproval.

- Words like technology can refer to everything from a sharpened stick, to a toilet, to a satellite receiver.

- Words like media can refer to people or audio-visual content.
Revising Word Choice: Thick & Thin Words

Like looking for words with different denotations and connotations, finding thin words requires me to have a strong vocabulary and to avoid using words that are subjective. I can generally avoid problems by using words and language that is similar to the academic sources I have been reading as part of my research project.

Unfortunately, to identify words that I am using that I should consider revising, I have to skim through my sentences and paragraphs looking for them. There are no shortcuts, other than to look at my notes, drafts, and outlines to identify words that I’ve been using frequently without thinking much about whether or not they are the best words for me to use in an academic researched argument.

I may not have to use a different word if I can clarify how I intend using the potentially unclear and subjective word.
Word Choice: Confusing Pronouns

Pronouns are words that replace a subject: I, you, he, she, it, we, they, me, him, her, us, them, this, that, etc.

Pronouns can become confusing when the subject they are referring to is unclear.

Pronouns can also become confusing when they are used to address readers directly.

- Both experienced and inexperienced writers could benefit from taking more time to revise their sentences so that they communicate more clearly.
- As English instructors, we should show, not just tell, students how to write more clearly.
Revising Word Choice: Confusing Pronouns

Finding pronouns is simple enough if I use the Find function to locate pronouns and identify those which may be confusing for my intended audience.

The simplest way to fix a confusing pronoun is to replace it with its antecedent (the person, place, thing, or idea that the pronoun replaces).
Word Choice: Confusing Homonyms

**Homophones** are homonyms that **sound the same** but have different meanings and different spellings. Homophones don’t confuse academic audiences for long, however, they can affect a writer’s credibility.

**Homographs** are homonyms that are spelled the same, but have different meanings and may even be pronounced differently. Homographs cause confusion when the context is unclear.

- They’re going to the computer right there to **write their** essay.
- It’s time for this research project to come to **its** conclusion.
- **To be** or not **too bee**, that’s the **real** question to get me reeling.
- Since you are so **close**, will you please **close** the door.
- One example of alternative energy uses **wind** to **wind** electricity-generating turbines.
Revising Word Choice: Confusing Homonyms

Confusing homonyms are most easily identified by reading out-loud or having someone else read through my paper looking for confusing homonyms. Computer software is getting better at identifying them, too, but it isn't 100% accurate.

Knowing the words that I commonly misuse can also help me revise more efficiently because I can use the Find function to look for the different spellings of words that I frequently misspell or misuse.
Word Choice: Unnecessary Phrases

Writing is a complex and many-stepped process. At the beginning of that process a writer must first create and come up with ideas. Next, a writer tries to identify and choose which words express his/her ideas best and most accurately. Then, a writer has to arrange those words into sentences so that the order and way that the ideas are communicated are clear. Finally, a writer revises his/her sentences so that they are appropriate and effective for the intended readers.
Word Choice: Unnecessary Phrases

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- **Complexity** can be more than *many steps*. Is that the intent here?
- Is there a significant and intended difference between *create/come up with? Identify/choose?*
- **Most accurate** describes why the words are *best* and sentence *order* describes *ways that ideas are communicated.***
- **Appropriate** and **effective** mean different things, but they are also pretty “thin” words that could use clarification.
Revising Word Choice: Unnecessary Phrases

Repetitious phrases can be found reading out-loud or having someone else read our paper looking specifically for repetitious phrases. I can also use the *Find* function to look for *and* to double-check if the phrases or clauses on either side are repetitious or not.

When/if I find repetitious phrases I need to decide which I should use. If I feel like there is an important or subtle distinction between the two phrases, I need to explain that distinction. I cannot assume that my academic readers will automatically recognize and appreciate the distinction I am trying to make. Not only do academics think differently from each other, most of the people reading my writing will not be looking for cleverness, alliteration, or subtle nuance. I have to point it out to them and then explain why I did so.
Improving Clarity

SENTENCE STRUCTURE
Sentence Structure: Standard Simple

The standard sentence structure in Standard American English (SAE) is to begin sentences with the subject and to end with the action:

Writers write.

Academic writers discuss clarity and fluidity.

The sentences above are examples of simple sentences. There is one group of words describing the subject and one group of words describing the action.
Sentence Structure: Active & Passive

When the subject of the sentence is doing the action, the sentence is considered to be an active sentence. Active sentences are considered to be more clear and are usually preferred in SAE:

Writers *write*.

*Academic writers* *discuss* *clarity* *and* *fluidity*.

When the subject of the sentence is not doing an action (the subject is just *being*), the sentence is considered to be a passive sentence. Passive sentences can potentially cause confusion, but can be used for emphasis or to avoid identifying who or what is doing the action.

*Clarity* *and* *fluidity* *are* *discussed* *by* *academic* *writers*.

*Clarity* *and* *fluidity* *are* *discussed*. 
Revising Sentence Structure: Active & Passive

I can check my sentence structures to make sure that I am using the passive sentence structure on purpose by using the *Find* function to look for *is*, *was*, *be*, *being*, or *been*.

If I find a sentence where the action is being done *to* the subject instead of *by* the subject, it is a passive sentence.

I should consider revising the sentence unless I want to use the passive sentence structure to create emphasis, add variety to my sentences, or avoid identifying who is doing the action for a specific reason (like I’m not sure who or what is responsible).
Sentence Structure: Clauses & Phrases

In spoken English, speakers use simple sentences because they are usually shorter and easier for listeners to understand. However, in written English, writers often lengthen their sentences by combining multiple clauses and phrases.

Writers write because they want to share their ideas with others.

Academic writers discuss clarity and fluidity when they revise paragraphs in English class.
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A clause is a group of words that has a subject and an action.

A phrase is a group of words without a subject and an action.
Sentence Structure: Standard Complex

When a sentence has one or more clauses that begin with a conjunction, it is called a complex sentence. The standard sentence structure for complex sentences in SAE is for the clauses with conjunctions to go after the clauses without conjunctions.

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Sentence Structure: Standard Complex

To add variety or to create emphasis, clauses and phrases can be rearranged in multiple combinations. However, in SAE there are a lot of grammar conventions that require specific punctuations. Also, changing the order of phrases and clauses can change the meaning of a sentence.

Writers write because they want to share their ideas with others.

Because they want to share their ideas with others, writers write.

Because they want to share their ideas, writers write with others.

Academic writers discuss clarity and fluidity when they revise paragraphs in English class.

When they revise paragraphs in English class, academic writers discuss clarity and fluidity.

When they revise paragraphs, academic writers discuss clarity and fluidity in English class.
Revising Sentence Structure: Standard Complex

I can check my sentence structures to make sure that I am using standard complex sentence structures by using the Find function to look for conjunctions at the beginning of sentences: after, although, as long as, because, before, even though, if, since, unless, when, while.

I should consider revising these complex sentences unless I want to use a different sentence structure to create emphasis or add variety to my sentences.

There are many more conjunctions than those listed above, but these are some of the most commonly used in academic writing. They are also the conjunctions that often result in incomplete sentences when used to begin a sentence. I should double-check sentences that begin with a conjunction to make sure that the sentence is a complete sentence.
Sentence Structure: Prepositional Phrases

The phrases below are called prepositional phrases because they begin with a preposition followed by a noun and/or adverbs and adjectives. Prepositional phrases can improve clarity by providing more detail to help communicate an idea. However, prepositional phrases can have a negative impact on fluidity because they make sentences more wordy.

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Students of English should revise phrases with prepositions to increase fluidity.

English students should revise prepositional phrases to increase fluidity.
Revising Sentence Structure: Prepositional Phrases

I can check my sentence structures to make sure that I am avoiding unnecessary prepositional phrase by using the Find function to look for prepositions at the beginning of phrases. Academic writers often use the following prepositions: about, after, as, at, before, by, despite, during, except, for, from, in, into, of, on, since, than, though, to, toward, until, with, without.

There are many more prepositions than those listed above, but these are some of the most commonly used in academic writing. They are also the prepositions that are often overused and that begin unnecessary prepositional phrases.

To improve fluidity, I should find other words or phrases I can use to describe my idea without using a prepositional phrase.
Sentence Structure: Actions as Subjects

Using an action as the subject of a sentence is grammatically correct and occasionally required to communicate an idea. Understanding when doing so creates confusion for readers is an important skill for academic writers to develop. Recognizing a tendency to write using this sentence structure is easy enough to do. To change such a well-established habit might not be quite so simple.
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All of the sentences above are examples of sentences that use an action as the subject of the sentence. Doing this occasionally can create variety in sentence structure. However, this sentence structure can become confusing if used too often. These sentence structures usually tend to make longer, wordier sentences too—which affects fluidity.
Revising Sentence Structure: Actions as Subjects

I can check my sentence structures to see if I have a habit of using actions as the subject of my sentences by using the Find function to look for sentences that begin with an –ing verb or to + verb.

Having learned how to recognize actions can be used as subjects, it is important for me to realize that not every sentence that begins with an –ing verb or to + verb is using an action as the subject. To give an example or two, this sentence and the one before do not use actions as subjects. The subject of the first sentence is it and the subject of the second sentence is this sentence and the one before.

To improve fluidity, I should find another way to organize my sentence or other words to express my idea, unless doing so would increase confusion for my readers.
Sentence Structure: More than Grammar

The sentence below is grammatically correct, but is an example of a writer relying on grammar and punctuation conventions to communicate clearly. An academic audience might be expected to understand these conventions, but even understanding the punctuation being used will not make it easier to read this paragraph. It will probably take longer, actually.

Having done so much research and having so much to say students and academics alike really struggle to get it all down in words; too many times they try to put everything into one sentence that—while grammatically correct—often takes a couple of re-reads to really understand what the main point is that they are trying to communicate (this sentence is an example of what not to do!).
The purpose of reviewing word choice and sentence structure is to help me realize that there are plenty of things I can recognize, find, and fix in my own writing to improve clarity. I can even do so without having a strong grasp of grammar and punctuation grammars. I probably don’t even need to remember what a complex sentence is or the difference between a clause and a phrase.

However, to improve the clarity of my writing, I do need to take the time to revise. Following the suggestions in this section can help me do so efficiently.
Improving Clarity

PARAGRAPHING
Paragraphing

Writing paragraphs helps writers communicate their ideas more thoroughly. During revision, however, paragraphing requires more specific actions:

- Combining sentences that help communicate, describe, explain, or argue one main idea
- Using topic sentences and transitions to clearly identify the main idea or purpose of a paragraph
- Breaking up lengthy paragraphs that try to communicate or argue more than one main idea
- Breaking up lengthy paragraphs that try to function in too many ways: e.g., introducing, describing, explaining, and arguing one main idea
Paragraphing

When paragraphing, academic writers should consider these questions:

- Is the main idea of this paragraph clear and its purpose(s) effective?
- Does this paragraph need a topic sentence, a transitional phrase, or both?
- Does this paragraph need to be broken up into smaller paragraphs to improve clarity or fluidity?
- Does this paragraph sufficiently explain the main idea or defend the main claim?
Paragraphing:
Is the main idea of this paragraph clear and its purpose(s) effective?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAIN IDEA OR CLAIM</th>
<th>PURPOSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowing that many of their paragraphs should communicate one main idea, academic</td>
<td>Sometimes an author needs more than one paragraph to really communicate an idea. For example, an author might want to defend a claim by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writers can make sure that their paragraphs do so. During revision, they can ask</td>
<td>clarifying a term with a definition, by providing an example of statistical data, comparing a personal experience with a recent research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>themselves, “Could someone else read this paragraph and identify the same idea that</td>
<td>study, and rebutting the counterargument he/she anticipates from the intended audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am trying to communicate?”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Paragraphing:

Is the main idea of this paragraph clear and its purpose(s) effective?

- Introduce a topic, purpose, or thesis
- Outline the organization of information in the sections or paragraphs of a paper
- Describe a situation
- Discuss the significance of an issue
- Provide examples and illustrations
- Paraphrase facts or statistics
- Quote expert opinions or ideas
- Narrate an example or hypothetical situation
- Define terms
- Compare or contrast ideas
- Evaluate interpretations of evidence
- Examine causes and effects
- Analyze the strength of a source’s ideas or interpretation of evidence
- Summarize a source or viewpoint
- Make a concession
- Describe a counterargument
- Make a rebuttal

**This list is not meant to include all the ways a paragraph can communicate a main idea or defend a claim.**
Paragraphing:
Do these paragraphs need a **topic sentence**, a **transitional phrase**, or **both**?

According to a recent study, eighty-seven percent of cyber attacks remain undetected for at least twenty-four hours (Walsh, 2013). This might not seem too bad because twenty-four hours is not that long of a time period. But in the digital realm, where data is manipulated at speeds measured in thousandths of a second, twenty-four hours is an eternity during which data can be decoded, copied, sold and otherwise used in ways it was not intended to be used by people who were not intended to have access to it.

This happened recently with the Target and Home Depot data breaches which affected thousands of customers (Daily, 2014). In those attacks, databases were compromised that held information about customers’ purchases and card numbers. Although not enough information was stolen for identity theft to occur, in combination with other data about customers, that might have been a real consequence. Even more concerning, however, was the amount of data stolen before the breach was detected and made public. Incidents like these raise serious concerns about cyber-security in the United States.
Data stored online can be stolen quickly and without being detected right away. According to a recent study, eighty-seven percent of cyber attacks remain undetected for at least twenty-four hours (Walsh, 2013). This might not seem too bad because twenty-four hours is not that long of a time period. But in the digital realm, where data is manipulated at speeds measured in thousandths of a second, twenty-four hours is an eternity during which data can be decoded, copied, sold and otherwise used in ways it was not intended to be used by people who were not intended to have access to it.

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The second paragraph neither introduces a new main idea nor makes a new claim. So it could, potentially, remain as part of the first paragraph. However, breaking it up at this point is a good idea because the paragraph provides and discusses an example of the claim made in the previous paragraph.
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For example, such cyber-attacks happened recently with the Target and Home Depot data breaches which affected thousands of customers (Daily, 2014). In those attacks, databases were compromised that held information about customers’ purchases and card numbers. Although not enough information was stolen for identity theft to occur in combination with other data about customers, such cyber-attacks raised serious concerns about cyber-security in the United States.

“For example” is a transitional phrase that tells readers what to anticipate in the paragraph and how to connect it to the main idea. Using the phrase "such cyber-attacks" instead of “this” helps avoid a potentially confusing pronoun.
Data stored online can be stolen quickly and without being detected right away. According to a recent study . . .

For example, such cyber-attacks happened recently with the Target and Home Depot data breaches which affected thousands of customers (Daily, 2014). . .

Not all breaches are found out. Because most of today’s security measures are responses to known attacks, preventing unknown attacks does not receive the priority and attention that it should. Perhaps for consumers a basic anti-virus program works well enough—unless they happen to be one of the first computers to be hacked by a new attack. But governments and businesses cannot rely on such an approach to cyber-security. The eighty-seven percent of attacks that go undetected for at least twenty-four hours may be a concern, but the unknown number of attacks that remain undetected are the real concern and the more terrifying reality.
Data stored online can be stolen quickly and without being detected right away. According to a recent study...

For example, such cyber-attacks happened recently with the Target and Home Depot data breaches which affected thousands of customers (Daily, 2014)....

The security measures in place today are not effectively preventing cyber-attacks. Because most of today's security measures are responses to known attacks, preventing unknown attacks does not receive the priority and attention that it should. Perhaps for consumers a basic anti-virus program works well enough—unless they happen to be one of the first computers to be hacked by a new attack. But governments and businesses cannot rely on such an approach to cyber-security. The eighty-seven percent of attacks that go undetected for at least twenty-four hours may be a concern, but the unknown number of attacks that remain undetected are the real concern and the more terrifying reality.
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For example, such cyber-attacks happened recently with the Target and Home Depot data breaches which affected thousands of customers (Daily, 2014)....

Data breaches like those at Target and the Home Depot suggest that the security measures in place today are not effectively preventing cyber-attacks. Because most of today’s security measures are responses to known attacks, preventing unknown attacks does not receive the priority and attention that it should. Perhaps for consumers a basic anti-virus program works well enough—unless they happen to be one of the first computers to be hacked by a new attack. But governments and businesses cannot rely on such an approach to cyber-security. The eighty-seven percent of attacks that go undetected for at least twenty-four hours may be a concern, but the unknown number of attacks that remain undetected are the real concern and the more terrifying reality.

A transitional phrase and some purposeful repetition can help readers connect this new claim with the one discussed earlier in the section.
Paragraphing:
Does this paragraph need to be broken up into smaller paragraphs to improve clarity or fluidity?

- Because it tries to explain more than one main idea or defend more than one main claim . . .

- Because it is trying to accomplish too much in one paragraph—provide an example, define a term, rebut a counter-argument, etc.
Paragraphing:
Does this paragraph sufficiently explain the main idea or defend the main claim?

- Using multiple argument strategies . . .
- Using multiple ideas and/or information from sources as evidence . . .
- Using multiple paragraphs to improve clarity and fluidity . . .
Improving Fluidity

ORGANIZATION & TRANSITION
Organization

Writers can control the order in which readers come across ideas and information in an article. This organization is often referred to as fluidity because organized writing controls the flow of ideas and information, much like the banks, rocks, and elevation control the flow of a river.

The most basic principle of organization is making sure that as readers come across new ideas or information they can understand them based on what was presented to them in previous paragraphs.
Organization

This ordering or organizing of ideas and information ensures that the intended audience will be able to reach the same conclusions as the author as he/she makes them in the paper. Or, at least, understand how the author arrived at those conclusions.

This organization occurs on the global and local levels.
Global Organization

The idea of global organization in academic writing is taught pretty effectively in high school—using the five-paragraph essay model. The exploratory essay in English 1010 introduces students to organizing an academic essay chronologically, by source, or by response to a problematic issue.
Local Organization

Local organization refers to the ordering and structure of paragraphs and sections. Most academic writers know what a paragraph is and how to write one, but they do not spend enough time revising transitions and topic sentences to make their paragraphs communicate ideas and information fluidly.
Transition

- To create fluidity on a global level, section headings help mark transitions between different parts of a paper.
- Transitional paragraphs help relate each section back to the thesis statement. They can also help summarize or outline the main points of a section. Transition paragraphs help readers understand how each section relates to the other sections.

- To create fluidity on a local level, topic sentences help mark transitions from one main idea to another within a section.
- Transitional words and phrases help relate each paragraph or main idea back to the purpose of the section or to the thesis statement. They also help connect individual sentences within a paragraph to each other.
Transition

Caution:
Although section headings help identify where a transition has occurred in a paper, they are insufficient to help readers make that transition. To really improve fluidity—and do more than act as a visual cue for skimming through an article—section headings require good transitional paragraphs to be most effective.

For the writer, a section heading is sufficient as a reminder of what he/she is trying to accomplish in a section. But section headings are only a last resort for confused readers who cannot figure out how one part of a paper relates to another.
The Paragraph

ONE MAIN IDEA & ONE PRIMARY PURPOSE
Rethinking “Paragraphs”

As mentioned above, paragraphs are a part of local organization. However, when paragraphs connect smoothly with one another they also contribute to the global organization of the paper. When the main point or purpose of each paragraph is easy for readers to identify, both the fluidity and the clarity of the paper is improved.

The biggest mistake made by inexperienced academic writers when it comes to paragraphs is thinking that a paragraph is just a group of sentences. Because of this way of thinking, paragraphs struggle to be clear and fluid.
One Main Idea

Knowing that many of their paragraphs should communicate one main idea, academic writers can make sure that their paragraphs do so. During revision, they can ask themselves, “Could someone else read this paragraph and identify the same idea that I am trying to communicate?”

This question should be asked about each paragraph during revision. If the answer is “No” or “I’m not sure,” the author needs to use better transitions or topic sentences to avoid confusion.
One Primary Purpose

While most paragraphs have a main idea that can be clarified using a topic sentence, sometimes an author needs more than one paragraph to really communicate an idea—especially if that idea is a claim that the intended audience might not already agree with.

For example, an author might want to defend a claim by clarifying a term with a definition, by providing an example of statistical data, comparing a personal experience with a recent research study, and rebutting the counterargument he/she anticipates from the intended audience.

Doing all of those things—in one paragraph—will make that paragraph pretty long. Breaking up a paragraph when it starts to use an additional argument strategy can help improve clarity. Adding a transitional word or phrase at the beginning of the newly created paragraph can improve fluidity.
Primary Purposes

- Introduce a topic, purpose, or thesis
- Outline the organization of information in the sections or paragraphs of a paper
- Describe a situation
- Discuss the significance of an issue
- Provide examples and illustrations
- Paraphrase facts or statistics
- Quote expert opinions or ideas
- Narrate an example or hypothetical situation
- Define terms
- Compare or contrast ideas
- Evaluate interpretations of evidence
- Examine causes and effects
- Analyze the strength of a source's ideas or interpretation of evidence
- Summarize a source or viewpoint
- Make a concession
- Describe a counterargument
- Make a rebuttal

**This list is not meant to include all the ways a paragraph can communicate a main idea or defend a claim.**
Topic Sentences
IDENTIFYING THE MAIN IDEA
Topic Sentences

Topic sentences are sentences that help readers identify the main idea an author is trying to communicate. A topic sentence communicates an idea or claim that the rest of the paragraph explains or defends.

Not every paragraph needs a topic sentence. However, experienced academic writers will use topic sentences frequently throughout their paper to do one or more of the following:

- Identify the main idea or claim being described, explained, or defended
- Connect a main idea or claim back to the thesis statement
- Relate a main idea or claim to an idea or claim from a previous paragraph
Players who use steroids illegally set a poor role model for younger players. Most players take steroids in dangerous doses that affect their health. Because not all players are willing to bend the rules, using steroids puts some players at a disadvantage. A fair competition is important to fans who become upset when they learn a player has been using steroids.
Players who use steroids illegally set a poor role model for younger players. Most players take steroids in dangerous doses that affect their health. Because not all players are willing to bend the rules, using steroids puts some players at a disadvantage. A fair competition is important to fans who become upset when they learn a player has been using steroids.
Using steroids in sports affects more than a player’s performance. Players who use steroids illegally set a poor role model for younger players. Most players take steroids in dangerous doses that affect their health. Because not all players are willing to bend the rules, using steroids puts some players at a disadvantage. A fair competition is important to fans who become upset when they learn a player has been using steroids.
Transitions

CONNECTING MY IDEAS WITH TRANSITIONAL PHRASES & PARAGRAPHS
Transitional Words & Phrases

Transitional words and phrases help create meaning in-between the sentences in a paragraph. They help readers understand the author’s thought-process and create meaning that otherwise might not be communicated.

The next three slides identify a number of transitional words and phrases that can be used to help readers anticipate what they are about to read and begin connecting it to what they have just read.

Caution:
Some of the words and phrases grouped together have significantly different denotations or connotations and are NOT interchangeable.
Transitional Words & Phrases

Used to Identify an Example or Emphasis
in other words, notably, in fact, in general, as an illustration, in this case, namely, to demonstrate, for this reason, to emphasize, that is to say, to clarify, to explain, important to realize, such as, for example, for instance, specifically, most compelling evidence, must be remembered, point often overlooked, significantly

Used to Identify a Conclusion, Summary, or Restatement
as can be seen, as shown above, given these points, as has been observed, as has been discussed, in summary, in conclusion, in short, in essence, altogether, overall, usually

Adapted from http://www.smart-words.org/linking-words/linking-words.pdf
Transitional Words & Phrases

**Used to Identify an Agreement, Addition, or Similarity**
not only . . . but also, in addition, in the same way, equally important, again, and, also, then, equally, uniquely, like, moreover, as well as, together with, likewise, comparatively, similarly, furthermore, additionally

**Used to Identify an Opposition, Limitation, or Contradiction**
although, but, by contrast, conversely, even though, however, in contrast, on the contrary, on the other hand, regardless, whereas, while, yet, at the same time, even so, even though, otherwise

Adapted from http://www.smart-words.org/linking-words/linking-words.pdf
Transitional Words & Phrases

**Used to Identify a Cause or Condition**
in the event that, as long as, so long as, on the condition that, with this intention, in the hope that, for fear that, in order to, in view of, if . . . then, unless, when, since, in case, given that, because of, since, while

**Used to Identify an Effect, Result, or Consequence**
as a result, under those circumstances, in that case, for this reason, thus, consequently, therefore, accordingly

Adapted from http://www.smart-words.org/linking-words/linking-words.pdf
More couples in the U.S. are adopting children from foreign countries. International adoption often creates as many problems as it solves. Couples need to be aware of these problems. Children still need parents who will love and take care of them.
More couples in the U.S. are adopting children from foreign countries. International adoption often creates as many problems as it solves. Couples need to be aware of these problems. Children still need parents who will love and take care of them.

**Today,** more couples in the U.S. are adopting children from foreign countries more than they have in the past. **Unfortunately,** international adoption often creates as many problems as it solves. Couples need to be aware of these problems as they consider adopting a child. **However,** children still need parents who will love and take care of them, **so** couples should not let the challenges of international adoption dissuade them.
Transitioning by Repeating Words & Phrases

Unnecessary repetition should be avoided, however repeating key words and phrases from one sentence to another can do a lot to improve clarity and to help readers transition from one sentence to another without losing track of the main idea.

Today, more couples in the U.S. are adopting children from foreign countries than they have in the past. Unfortunately, international adoption often creates as many problems as it solves. Couples need to be aware of these problems as they consider adopting a child. However, there are many children who need parents that will love and take care of them, so couples should not let the challenges of international adoption dissuade them.
Transitioning by Repeating Words & Phrases

Today, more couples in the U.S. are adopting children from foreign countries than they have in the past. Unfortunately, international adoption often creates as many problems as it solves. Couples need to be aware of these problems as they consider adopting a child. However, there are many children who need parents that will love and take care of them, so couples should not let the challenges of international adoption dissuade them.

Today, more couples in the U.S. are adopting children from foreign countries than they have in the past. Unfortunately, legally becoming the parents of children who are not biological and from other countries often creates as many problems at it solves. Married or unmarried people living together need to be aware of these problems as they consider taking on a young person. However, there are many kids who need adults that will love and take care of them, so domestic partners should not let the challenges of international adoption dissuade them.
Connecting Paragraphs with Transitions

Transitional words and phrases help readers understand how a new paragraph relates to the previous paragraph: introducing a new idea, providing an example, introducing a counterargument to the previous main idea in the previous paragraph, etc.

A quick for example can help readers know exactly how information in one paragraph or sentences relates to another.

It is important, however, to use transitions appropriately. An improperly used transition creates confusion rather than clarity.
Transitional Paragraphs

In lengthier academic writing (like a researched argument) using transitional paragraphs improves clarity and fluidity. Such a paragraph does not need to be very long, but it can explain how sections relate to one another and to the thesis statement.

Before or after the section heading?

Transitional paragraphs that mostly summarize a preceding section and relate it to the thesis statement go at the end of the preceding section.

Transitional paragraphs that mostly outline a following section and relate it to the thesis statement go at the beginning of that following section.
In-Class Exercises
Skinner and Bales both provide a definition of what slavery is, which is essential to their article. Skinner defines slavery as, “A human being forced to work through fraud or threat of violence for no pay beyond subsistence” (1). Bales definition of slavery is, “the total control of one person by another for the purpose of economic exploitation . . . when we strip away the lies, we find someone controlled by violence and denied all of their personal freedom to make money for someone else” (280). Both authors share a similar viewpoint of what slavery is. First off, slavery is when someone is controlled by another. They both agree that this control comes most often through violence and fraud. They are similarly in agreeance that someone in slavery is paid nothing or only enough to keep them barely alive.
So, what's the big deal? After much personal experience and, what might be constituted as "field work", and research, I have come to a conclusion. That conclusion is that, while these new technologies may not be turning us into illiterate morons as some would have you believe, they are hurting society in ways that we've not even fathomed. "Some of the dangers of late modernity," Says John Bird, "lie in the ability to do things at a distance so that the consequences of what is done are invisible" (Bird 125). These technologies are amazing, and convenient, and place a nearly limitless font of communications power and information at our beck and call, but they are, nonetheless, slowly eroding away at the fabric of good communication.
While most paragraphs have a main point that can be clarified using a topic sentence, sometimes an author needs more than one paragraph to really communicate an idea or persuasively defend a claim. For example, an author might want to defend his claim that paragraphs should focus on one main idea and function with one or two main purposes. To defend the claim the author decides to define what he means by “main idea” and then provide some examples. Then the author figures that he should talk about how topic sentences are useful academic writing conventions that help readers understand what the main idea of a paragraph is. But as the author continues to defend his claim, he begins to realize that his paragraph is getting longer and longer. Because he is taking so much time to define, explain, and provide examples, he already has already written a pretty long paragraph that has not even begun to talk about how paragraphs should function with one or two main purposes. Since this is his first draft, he might decide to continue defending his claim. By not stopping to revise, he can make sure that he gets all of his ideas out in the paragraph and he can be pretty sure that everything is staying focused on that one, main claim. However, when he goes back to revise for fluidity and clarity, he will need to remember that if a paragraph is trying to do too many things at once, it should be broken up into multiple paragraphs.

Class: Why might we think this paragraph should be broken up? Where could be a good place to make that division?
(1) Even though they may disagree, academics on both sides of these main ideas find even ground in the fact that although violent media is a part of the puzzle, it is not the all powerful variable that determines aggressive behavior in children and adults. (2) Nevertheless violent media does share a unique correlation with aggressive behavior. “Although the data do not point to media violence as the major cause of violence in society, it is certainly a socially significant one” (Victor C. Strasburger, pg. 37). (3) And most academics agree that as technology, people, and the way in which we absorb media change, future laboratory and field research will be needed.
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