

## 4b Achieving paragraph coherence

A paragraph is unified if it holds together—if all its details and examples support the central idea. A paragraph is coherent if readers can see *how* the paragraph holds together—how the sentences relate to each other—without having to stop and reread.

Incoherence gives readers the feeling of being yanked around, as the following example shows.

The ancient Egyptians were masters of preserving dead people’s bodies by making mummies of them. Mummies several thousand years old have been discovered nearly intact. The skin, hair, teeth, finger- and toenails, and facial features of the mummies were evident. One can diagnose the diseases they suffered in life, such as smallpox, arthritis, and nutritional deficiencies. The process was remarkably effective. Sometimes apparent were the fatal afflictions of the dead people: a middle-aged king died from a blow on the head, and polio killed a child king. Mummification consisted of removing the internal organs, applying natural preservatives inside and out, and then wrapping the body in layers of bandages.

Topic sentence

Sentences related to topic sentence but disconnected from each other

The paragraph as it was actually written appears below. It is much clearer because the writer arranged information differently and also built links into his sentences so that they would flow smoothly:

- After stating the central idea in a topic sentence, the writer moves to two more specific explanations and illustrates the second with four sentences of examples.
- **Circled** words repeat or restate key terms or concepts.
- **Boxed** words link sentences and clarify relationships.
- **Underlined** phrases are in parallel grammatical form to reflect their parallel content.

The ancient Egyptians were masters of preserving dead people’s bodies by making mummies of them. Basically, mummification consisted of removing the internal organs, applying natural preservatives inside and out, and then wrapping the body in layers of bandages. And the process was remarkably effective.

Topic sentence

Explanation 1: What mummification is

Indeed, mummies several thousand years old have been discovered nearly intact. Their skin, hair, teeth, finger- and toenails, and facial features are still evident. Their diseases in life, such as smallpox, arthritis, and nutritional deficiencies, are still diagnosable. Even their fatal afflictions are still apparent: a middle-aged king died from a blow on the head; a child king died from polio.

Explanation 2: Why the Egyptians were masters

Specific examples of explanation 2

—Mitchell Rosenbaum (student),  
“Lost Arts of the Egyptians”

## 1 Organizing the paragraph

The paragraphs on mummies illustrate an essential element of coherence: information must be arranged in an order that readers can follow easily and that corresponds to their expectations. The common organizations for paragraphs correspond to those for entire essays: by space, by time, and for emphasis. (In addition, the patterns of development also suggest certain arrangements. See pp. 91–100.)

**Note** On a computer you can experiment with different paragraph organizations and emphases. Copy a paragraph, paste the copy into your document, and then try moving sentences around. To evaluate the versions, you'll need to edit each one so that sentences flow smoothly, attending to repetition, parallelism, transitions, and the other techniques discussed in this section.

### ■ Organizing by space or time

A paragraph organized **spatially** focuses readers' attention on one point and scans a person, object, or scene from that point. The movement usually parallels the way people actually look at things, from top to bottom, from side to side, from near to far. Virginia Woolf follows the last pattern in the following paragraph:

#### Spatial organization

The sun struck straight upon the house, making the white walls glare between the dark windows. Their panes, woven thickly with green branches, held circles of impenetrable darkness. Sharp-edged wedges of light lay upon the window-sill and showed inside the room plates with blue rings, cups with curved handles, the bulge of a great bowl, the criss-cross pattern in the rug, and the formidable corners and lines of cabinets and bookcases. Behind their conglomeration hung a zone of shadow in which might be a further shape to be disencumbered of shadow or still denser depths of darkness.

—Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

Description moving from outside (closer) to inside (farther)

Unstated central idea: Sunlight barely penetrated the house's secrets.

Another familiar way of organizing the elements of a paragraph is **chronologically**—that is, in order of their occurrence in time. In a chronological paragraph, as in experience, the earliest events come first, followed by more recent ones.

#### Chronological organization

Nor can a tree live without soil. A hurricane-born mangrove island may bring its own soil to the sea. But other mangrove trees make their own soil—and their own islands—from scratch. These are the ones which interest me.

Topic sentence



The seeds germinate in the fruit on the tree. The germinated embryo can drop anywhere—say, onto a dab of floating muck. The heavy root end sinks; a leafy plumule unfurls. The tiny seedling, afloat, is on its way. Soon aerial roots shooting out in all directions trap debris. The sapling’s networks twine, the interstices narrow, and water calms in the lee. Bacteria thrive on organic broth; amphipods swarm. These creatures grow and die at the tree’s wet feet. The soil thickens, accumulating rainwater, leaf rot, seashells, and guano; the island spreads.

—Annie Dillard, “Sojourner”

Details in order of their occurrence

### Organizing for emphasis

Some organizational schemes are imposed on paragraphs to achieve a certain emphasis. The most common is the **general-to-specific** scheme, in which the topic sentence often comes first and then the following sentences become increasingly specific. The paragraph on mummies (pp. 78–79) illustrates this organization: each sentence is either more specific than the one before it or at the same level of generality. Here is another illustration:

#### General-to-specific organization

Perhaps the simplest fact about sleep is that individual needs for it vary widely. Most adults sleep between seven and nine hours, but occasionally people turn up who need twelve hours or so, while some rare types can get by on three or four. Rarest of all are those legendary types who require almost no sleep at all; respected researchers have recently studied three such people. One of them—a healthy, happy woman in her seventies—sleeps about an hour every two or three days. The other two are men in early middle age, who get by on a few minutes a night. One of them complains about the daily fifteen minutes or so he’s forced to “waste” in sleeping.

—Lawrence A. Mayer, “The Confounding Enemy of Sleep”

Topic sentence

Supporting examples, increasingly specific

### 2 Repeating or restating key words

Repeating or restating the important words in a paragraph binds the sentences together and keeps the paragraph’s topic uppermost in readers’ minds. In the next example, notice how the circled words relate the sentences and stress the important ideas of the paragraph:

Having listened to both **Chinese** and **English**, I also tend to be suspicious of any **comparisons** between the two **languages**. Typically, one **language**—that of the person doing the **comparing**—is often used as the standard, the benchmark for a logical form of expression. And so the **language** being **compared** is always in danger of being judged deficient or superfluous, simplistic or unnecessarily complex, melodious or cacophonous. **English** speakers point out that **Chinese** is **extremely difficult** because it relies on variations in tone barely discernible to the human ear. By the same token, **Chinese** speakers tell me **English** is **extremely difficult** because it is inconsistent, a language of too many broken rules, of Mickey Mice and Donald Ducks.

—Amy Tan, “The Language of Discretion”

This paragraph links sentences through their structure, too, because the subject of each one picks up on key words used earlier:

*Sentence 1:* Having listened to both **Chinese** and **English**, I tend to be suspicious of any **comparisons** between the two **languages**.

*Sentence 2:* Typically, one **language**. . .

*Sentence 3:* And so the **language**. . .

*Sentence 4:* **English speakers**. . .

*Sentence 5:* **Chinese speakers**. . .

In many incoherent paragraphs, such as the one on mummification on page 78, each sentence subject introduces a topic new to the paragraph so that readers have trouble following the thread. (See pp. 386–87 for more on linking sentences through their subjects.)

#### 4 Using pronouns

**Pronouns** such as *she*, *he*, *it*, *they*, and *who* refer to and function as nouns (see p. 237). Thus pronouns naturally help relate sentences to one another. In the following paragraph the pronouns and the nouns they refer to are circled:

After dark, on the warrenlike streets of Brooklyn where **I** live, **I** often see **women** who fear the worst from **me**. **They** seem to have set **their** faces on neutral, and with **their** purse straps strung across **their** chests bandolier-style, **they** forge ahead as though bracing **themselves** against being tackled. **I** understand, of course, that the danger **they** perceive is not a hallucination. **Women** are particularly vulnerable to street violence, and young black males are drastically overrepresented among the perpetrators of that violence. Yet these truths are no solace against the kind of alienation that comes of being ever the suspect, a fearsome entity with whom pedestrians avoid making eye contact.

—Brent Staples, “Black Men and Public Space”

#### 5 Being consistent

Being consistent is the most subtle way to achieve paragraph coherence because readers are aware of consistency only when it is absent. Consistency (or the lack of it) occurs primarily in the tense of verbs and in the number and person of nouns and pronouns (see



Chapter 20). Although some shifts will be necessary to reflect your meaning, inappropriate shifts, as in the following passages, will interfere with a reader's ability to follow the development of ideas:

#### Shifts in tense

In the Hopi religion, water is the driving force. Since the Hopi lived in the Arizona desert, they needed water urgently for drinking, cooking, and irrigating crops. Their complex beliefs are focused in part on gaining the assistance of supernatural forces in obtaining water. Many of the Hopi kachinas, or spirit essences, were directly concerned with clouds, rain, and snow.

#### Shifts in number

Kachinas represent the things and events of the real world, such as clouds, mischief, cornmeal, and even death. A kachina is not worshiped as a god but regarded as an interested friend. They visit the Hopi from December through July in the form of men who dress in kachina costumes and perform dances and other rituals.

#### Shifts in person

Unlike the man, the Hopi woman does not keep contact with kachinas through costumes and dancing. Instead, one receives a small likeness of a kachina, called a *tihu*, from the man impersonating the kachina. You are more likely to receive a tihu as a girl approaching marriage, though a child or older woman sometimes receives one, too.

## 6 Using transitional expressions

Specific words and word groups, called **transitional expressions**, can connect sentences whose relationships may not be instantly clear to readers. Notice the difference in the following two versions of the same paragraph:

Medical science has succeeded in identifying the hundreds of viruses that can cause the common cold. It has discovered the most effective means of prevention. One person transmits the cold viruses to another most often by hand. An infected person covers his mouth to cough. He picks up the telephone. His daughter picks up the telephone. She rubs her eyes. She has a

Paragraph is choppy and hard to follow

cold. It spreads. To avoid colds, people should wash their hands often and keep their hands away from their faces.

Medical science has **thus** succeeded in identifying the hundreds of viruses that can cause the common cold. It has **also** discovered the most effective means of prevention. One

Transitional expressions (boxed) remove choppi-ness and spell out relationships

person transmits the cold viruses to another most often by hand. For instance, an infected person covers his mouth to cough. Then he picks up the telephone. Half an hour later, his daughter picks up the same telephone. Immediately afterward, she rubs her eyes. Within a few days, she, too, has a cold. And thus it spreads. To avoid colds, therefore, people should wash their hands often and keep their hands away from their faces.

—Kathleen LaFrank (student),  
“Colds: Myth and Science”

There are scores of transitional expressions on which to draw. The box below shows many common ones, arranged according to the relationships they convey.

## Transitional expressions

### To add or show sequence

again, also, and, and then, besides, equally important, finally, first, further, furthermore, in addition, in the first place, last, moreover, next, second, still, too

### To compare

also, in the same way, likewise, similarly

### To contrast

although, and yet, but, but at the same time, despite, even so, even though, for all that, however, in contrast, in spite of, nevertheless, notwithstanding, on the contrary, on the other hand, regardless, still, though, yet

### To give examples or intensify

after all, an illustration of, even, for example, for instance, indeed, in fact, it is true, of course, specifically, that is, to illustrate, truly

### To indicate place

above, adjacent to, below, elsewhere, farther on, here, near, nearby, on the other side, opposite to, there, to the east, to the left

### To indicate time

after a while, afterward, as long as, as soon as, at last, at length, at that time, before, earlier, formerly, immediately, in the meantime, in the past, lately, later, meanwhile, now, presently, shortly, simultaneously, since, so far, soon, subsequently, then, thereafter, until, when

### To repeat, summarize, or conclude

all in all, altogether, as has been said, in brief, in conclusion, in other words, in particular, in short, in simpler terms, in summary, on the whole, that is, therefore, to put it differently, to summarize

### To show cause or effect

accordingly, as a result, because, consequently, for this purpose, hence, otherwise, since, then, therefore, thereupon, thus, to this end, with this object

**Note** Draw carefully on the preceding list of transitional expressions because the ones in each group are not interchangeable. For instance, *besides*, *finally*, and *second* may all be used to add information, but each has its own distinct meaning.



#### EXERCISE 4.7 Arranging sentences coherently

After the topic sentence (sentence 1), the sentences in the student paragraph below have been deliberately scrambled to make the paragraph incoherent. Using the topic sentence and other clues as guides, rearrange the sentences in the paragraph to form a well-organized, coherent unit. (You can do this exercise online at [ablongman.com/littlebrown](http://ablongman.com/littlebrown).)

We hear complaints about the Postal Service all the time, but we 1  
 should not forget what it does *right*. The total volume of mail de- 2  
 livered by the Postal Service each year makes up almost half 3  
 the total delivered in all the world. Its 70,000 employees handle 4  
 140,000,000,000 pieces of mail each year. And when was the last 5  
 time they failed to deliver yours? In fact, on any given day the Postal 6  
 Service delivers almost as much mail as the rest of the world com-  
 bined. That huge number means over 2,000,000 pieces per employee  
 and over 560 pieces per man, woman, and child in the country.

#### EXERCISE 4.8 Eliminating inconsistencies

The following paragraph is incoherent because of inconsistencies in person, number, or tense. Identify the inconsistencies and revise the paragraph to give it coherence. (You can do this exercise online at [ablongman.com/littlebrown](http://ablongman.com/littlebrown).) For further exercises in eliminating inconsistencies, see pages 359, 360–61, and 363.

The Hopi tihu, or kachina likeness, is often called a “doll,” but its owner, usually a girl or woman, does not regard them as a plaything. Instead, you treated them as a valued possession and hung them out of the way on a wall. For its owner the tihu represents a connection with the kachina’s spirit. They are considered part of the kachina, carrying a portion of the kachina’s power.

#### EXERCISE 4.9 Using transitional expressions

Transitional expressions have been removed from the following paragraph at the numbered blanks. Fill in each blank with an appropriate transitional expression (1) to contrast, (2) to intensify, and (3) to show effect. Consult the list on pages 86–87 if necessary. (You can do this exercise online at [ablongman.com/littlebrown](http://ablongman.com/littlebrown).)

All over the country, people are swimming, jogging, weightlifting, dancing, walking, playing tennis—doing anything to keep fit. (1) this school has consistently refused to construct and equip a fitness center. The school has (2) refused to open existing athletic facilities to all students, not just those playing organized sports. (3) students have no place to exercise except in their rooms and on dangerous public roads.

#### EXERCISE 4.11 Writing a coherent paragraph

Write a coherent paragraph from the following information, combining and rewriting sentences as necessary. First, begin the paragraph with the topic sentence given and arrange the supporting sentences in a climactic order. Then combine and rewrite the supporting sentences, helping the reader see connections by introducing repetition and restatement, parallelism, pronouns, consistency, and transitional expressions. (You can do this exercise online at [ablongman.com/littlebrown](http://ablongman.com/littlebrown).)

### Topic sentence

Hypnosis is far superior to drugs for relieving tension.

### Supporting information

Hypnosis has none of the dangerous side effects of the drugs that relieve tension.

Tension-relieving drugs can cause weight loss or gain, illness, or even death.

Hypnosis is nonaddicting.

Most of the drugs that relieve tension do foster addiction.

Tension-relieving drugs are expensive.

Hypnosis is inexpensive even for people who have not mastered self-hypnosis.

### EXERCISE 4.12 Turning topic sentences into coherent paragraphs

Develop three of the following topic sentences into coherent paragraphs. Organize your information by space, by time, or for emphasis, as seems most appropriate. Use repetition and restatement, parallelism, pronouns, consistency, and transitional expressions to link sentences. (You can do this exercise online at [ablongman.com/littlebrown](http://ablongman.com/littlebrown).)

1. The most interesting character in the book [or movie] was \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Of all my courses, \_\_\_\_\_ is the one that I think will serve me best throughout life.
3. Although we in the United States face many problems, the one we should concentrate on solving first is \_\_\_\_\_.
4. The most dramatic building in town is the \_\_\_\_\_.
5. Children should not have to worry about the future.