

Paragraph coherence

It is important that your paragraphs are organized in a way which is easy to follow for your readers. The organization of your paragraph shows the process of building up your argumentation, therefore a well-organized paragraph is crucial for creating an effective text.

There are numerous ways of ensuring your paragraphs are organized in a logical way: by being organized by space and/or time, using repetitions, being consistent, or using transitional words or expressions.

Look at the paragraph below. Do you find the organization logical? What are the problems of the paragraph?

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

- 1) Organization by space and time
 - This kind of organization follows a person, an object or a place from one point to another in a natural way (from left to right, from top to bottom, from near to far, etc.). Consider the following:

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.

- A similar way of organizing a paragraph is chronologically – in order of their occurrence in time.

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. 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"

Topic sentence

Details in order of their occurrence

2) Organization by emphasis

- Another common way of organizing a paragraph is to focus on emphasis, often moving from a general example to more specific information.

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

3) Repeating or restating key words and phrases

- Sometimes just following a logical order of sentences in your paragraph is not enough. You might want to connect the information contained within by using a few other techniques, repetition/restatement being one of them.

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 . . .

4) Consistency

- An oft ignored aspect of writing, being consistent is important for delivering information in a coherent and clear manner. Failure to do so often confuses the readers, as it makes it unclear what exactly you are referring to.

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.

5) Transitional expressions

- Specific words and phrases – transitional expressions – can help connecting sentences whose relationship may not be instantly clear. Notice the differences in the following two versions of the same text.

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

Paragraph is choppy and hard to follow

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 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.

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

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

There are numerous transitional expressions you can use. The most common include:

To add or show sequence: again, also, and, and then, besides, 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, despite, even so, even though, however, in contrast, in spite of, nevertheless, notwithstanding, on the contrary, on the other hand, regardless, still, though, yet

To give examples or intensity: after all, even, for example, for instance, in fact, it is true, of course, to illustrate

To indicate place: above, adjacent to, below, elsewhere, here, near, nearby, on the other side, opposite to,

Adapted from Fowler, Henry Ramsey; Aaron, Jane E., and Janice Okoomian. *The Little, Brown Handbook*. 10th ed. New York: Longman. 2007.

To indicate time: after a while, afterward, as long as, as soon as, at least, at that time, before, earlier, formerly, immediately, in the meantime, lately, later, meanwhile, now presently, shortly, since, so far, soon, subsequently, then, until, when

To repeat, summarize, or conclude: all in all, altogether, in brief, in conclusion, in other words, in particular, in short, in simpler terms, in summary, on the whole, that is, therefore, to conclude, to put it differently,

To show cause or effect: accordingly, as a result, because, consequently, for this purpose, hence, otherwise, since, then, therefore, thus, to this end, with this object

Exercise: Rearrange the sentences in the paragraph below to form a well-organized and coherent paragraph (begin with sentence 1).

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

Exercise: using transitional expressions. Fill each blank with an appropriate transitional expression (1) to contrast, (2) to intensify, and (3) to show effect.

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: Write a coherent paragraph from the following information, combining and rewriting sentences as necessary.

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: Develop one of the following topic sentences into coherent paragraphs. Organize your information by space, by time, or for emphasis, as you feel fit. Use repetition and restatement, parallelism, consistency and transitional expressions to link sentences together.

- 1) The most interesting character in the book/movie was _____.
- 2) What we as society should focus on is _____.
- 3) The most odd/unusual building in town is the _____.
- 4) Children should not have to worry about the future.
- 5) One of the most important experiences I had while growing up was _____.