Cohesive paragraphs, Part 2

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Part 1 of this article appeared in the August 2001 issue.

**Topic strings.** Regarding topics, Williams (1995) states and then gives the following wonderful example: “Here’s the point. In the clearest writing, the topics of most sentences and clauses are their grammatical subjects. But what’s more important than their grammatical function is the way topics control how readers read sentences, not individually, but in sequences, and the way that writers must therefore organize sequences of topics. The most important concern of a writer, then, is not the individual topics of individual sentences, but the cumulative effect of the sequence of topics.”

Consider these illustrative discussions of the role of topics:

In this paragraph, *italics* indicates topics. *Particular ideas toward the beginning of each clause define what a passage is centrally “about” for readers, so a sense of coherence crucially depends on topics. Cumulatively, the thematic signposts that are provided by these ideas should focus the reader’s attention toward a well defined and limited set of connected ideas. Moving through a paragraph from a cumulatively coherent point of view is made possible by a sequence of topics that seem to constitute this coherent sequence of topicalized ideas. A seeming absence of context for each sentence is one consequence of making random shifts in topics. Feelings of dislocations, disorientation, and lack of focus will occur when that happens. The seeming coherence of whole sections will turn on a reader’s point of views as a result of topic announcement.*

Compare that with this revision:

In this paragraph, I have *italicized* the topic of every clause. *Topics* are crucial for a reader because they focus the reader’s attention on a particular idea toward the beginning of a clause and thereby notify a reader what a clause is “about.” *Topics* thereby crucially determine whether the reader will feel a passage is coherent. Cumulatively, through a series of sentences, *these topicalized ideas* provide thematic signposts that focus the reader’s attention on a well-defined set of connected ideas. If a *sequence of topics* seems coherent, that *consistent sequence* will move the reader through a paragraph from a cumulatively coherent point of view. But if through that paragraph, *topics* shift randomly, then *the reader* has to begin each sentence out of context, from no coherent point of view. When *that* happens, *the reader* will feel dislocated, disoriented, out of focus. *Whatever the writer announces as a topic,* then, will fix the reader’s point of view, not just toward the rest of the sentence, but toward whole sections.

The first paragraph has no consistent focus, no consistent string of topics. The passage is disjointed, choppy, lack-

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**Editor’s note:** This column is the fourth in a series of tutorials adapted from Joseph M. Williams’ book Style: Toward Clarity and Grace.

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**Blockette.** For those who care little about capitalization and punctuation: An English professor wrote the words, “woman without her man is nothing” on the blackboard and directed his students to capitalize and punctuate it. The male students wrote: “Woman, without her man, is nothing.” The female students wrote: “Woman. Without her, man is nothing.”