

Cohesive paragraphs, Part 2

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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-

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

ing flow, and makes most readers feel dislocated or unfocused. The revision focuses on fewer concepts: mainly topics and reader. The second passage has a more consistent *topic string* and therefore gives the reader focus and cohesion.

The principle of consistent topic string supports the discussion in my May and June columns—characters and actions. When your sentence subjects predictably name your central characters—real or abstract—and your verbs name their actions, you are beginning your sentences with material your reader will find consistent: the viewpoint of your characters.

Another element of consistent topic strings deals with nominalizations—making nouns from verbs and adjectives. In previous columns I discussed the bane of nominalizations, i.e., confusing readers by using weak verbs and putting the actions of the characters into abstract, confusing nouns. However, all nominalizations are not bad. You may use nominalizations as topics referring to material previously discussed. This is an important function of nominalizations: summarizing material, specifically actions, mentioned earlier so that you can now comment on it.

Transitioning. The concept of transitioning is rooted in the principle that we learn based on what we already know. This is understood by successful writers who begin sentences with ideas already mentioned or familiar to their readers. This is transitioning—building what is new upon that which already exists.

Transitioning is one of the reasons for the passive voice—to allow smooth transitioning and maintain cohesion. Re-examine the microseismicity example at the beginning of Part 1 (*TLE*, August 2001). The successful sentence was the sentence with the smooth transition, the passive-voice sentence. To maintain smooth transitions, you may find yourself writing many passive-voice sentences. If active voice creates a less consistent transition or less consistent topic string, leave the sentences passive.

A final note. The key to successful diagnosis of cohesion is your own sensitivity. When you jam your text with unnecessary nominalizations and passives, your writing should feel bloated. When you jump from topic to topic, your writing should feel disjointed, choppy, and out of focus. Your goal is to "be sensitive to how you feel when you read and to develop an instinct for where to look when you don't like what you've read. You will always know where to begin revising" (Williams, 1995).

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." E

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