

Our handout on clarity and conciseness focuses on revising individual sentences. This handout moves from the sentence-level to the paragraph, offering tips on revising paragraphs for maximum readability.

Cohesion

- Sense of sentence-by-sentence flow by which the reader moves through a passage, with each sentence connecting to the previous one and the one that follows
- The beginning of a sentence is its *topic*: it's what the sentence is about
- The end of a sentence is its *stress*: it's what the sentence delivers, what's most important about it

Coherence

- Coherence refers to the overall sense of unity in a passage, including both the main point of sentences and the main point of each paragraph.
- Coherence focuses the reader's attention on the specific people, things, and events you are writing about

To Improve Cohesion

For Cohesion in Sentence Beginnings . . . Put the OLD FIRST

- Begin your sentences with information familiar to your readers
- Don't begin a sentence with a bit of new information
- Don't begin a sentence with a bit of technical information
- Use your openings to refer back to previous material or gently introduce a new topic

For Cohesion in Sentence Endings . . . Put the NEW LAST

- End your sentences with new information your readers cannot anticipate
- Don't end a sentence with old information
- Put the new, technical, and difficult information at the end of the sentence
- Use transitions to convey the connections between the ideas in your sentences

What Readers Remember From Sentences

First: the sentence ending

Second: the sentence beginning

Last: the sentence middle

To Improve Coherence

Coherence is established in two ways:

1. Topics of individual sentences are clear
2. Topics of paragraphs are clear

A paragraph is much more than a group of sentences set off by an indentation. If you can't quickly and succinctly say what a paragraph's main point is, it lacks coherence.

Here's an example passage:

As a reminder, please promptly return the lecture notes you borrowed. Slide the notes under my door if I am not there. I may become agitated if you are late, much like my Uncle Chester after several egg-nogs on Christmas Eve. Most Christmases I liked to stay up and open my stockings after midnight. Staying up late was exciting and would be repeated a week later at New Year's. So would Uncle Chester's disgraceful behavior.

The passage is **cohesive**.

- Each sentence connects with the next and the previous.
- Sentences begin with familiar information.
- Sentences end with new information.

But the passage is **not coherent**.

- The *topic* of each sentence is different from the previous.
- Thus, the paragraph lacks focus.

Why Are Cohesion and Coherence Important?

Cohesion is important because it allows us to make multiple references to people, things, and events without reintroducing them at each turn. If we had to repeat these every time we wanted to refer to them, the text would be very tedious to read.

A **coherent** passage focuses the reader's attention on the main ideas and the specific people, things, and events you are writing about.

Need Some Help?

The Writing Studio and Electronic Resources

Schedule a session at the Writing Studio: <http://twp.duke.edu/writing-studio>

For electronic resources, click on "Handouts and Resources" on the Writing Studio homepage

Books on Style

Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace by Joseph M. Williams

Revising Prose by Richard Lanham