

Writing: Paragraphs and Transitions

A paragraph is a unit of thought. Unit by unit, your paragraphs together develop your paper's thesis. In other words, the central ideas of each of your paragraphs, in sequence, represent an outline of your argument.

Good paragraphs are unified and coherent. You'll find that unified paragraphs often develop a topic sentence that announces the paragraph's theme or controlling idea. Here's an example:

Freudians are self-contradictory and dogmatic. They contradict themselves whenever they speak of analysis as "The Cure" and at the same time encourage patients to think of analysis as an open-ended process, often lasting for decades. They're maddeningly dogmatic when they meet every criticism with a reference to one of their sacred texts, as if the great Sigmund had an answer for every problem in the modern world.

In this example the topic sentence is the first sentence in the paragraph. Most of the time it's reassuring to your reader to find it there. (It's also helpful to you as a writer; a strong topic sentence means you know from the beginning what you want your paragraph to be about.) Occasionally you may want to locate your topic sentence in the middle of the paragraph, or perhaps to build up to it at the end. Sometimes a paragraph doesn't have an explicit topic sentence, but if not, the paragraph should be so unified that a reader would have no difficulty summarizing its central point.

Irrelevant details or a shift in focus can disrupt paragraph unity. Let's look at our example again, after a less disciplined writer has had a crack at it:

Freudians are self-contradictory and dogmatic. They contradict themselves whenever they speak of analysis as "The Cure" and at the same time encourage patients to think of analysis as an open-ended process, often lasting for decades. Analysis can be expensive, too; many Freudian practitioners charge as much as \$250 for 50 minutes, and since this can go on for years, a patient may be left with staggering debt. They're maddeningly dogmatic when they meet every criticism with a reference to their sacred texts, as if the great Sigmund had an answer for every problem in the modern world.

The sentence this writer has added is distracting; how much analysis costs isn't really the point. And the sentence not only disrupts the paragraph's unity, it shifts its focus from Freudians and their theory to the perspective of the suffering, impoverished patient.

Paragraphs should be coherently organized as well as unified. In our first example the writer's organizational plan is clear: she takes the first term in her topic sentence, *self-contradictory*, and explains it; then she does the same for the second term, *dogmatic*. Many other kinds of organization are possible: for example, you can describe something from the outside to the inside; you can go from the general to the specific or vice versa; you can proceed chronologically. Just be sure that the reader can tell what your plan is. Be sure you have a plan.

If each of your paragraphs is unified and organized, you next need to look at them together to be sure they're in the right order. If they aren't, rearrange them so the sequence makes logical sense. When it does, you usually don't have to worry much about transitions, because the logic of each paragraph will carry you naturally into the next. Writers who have big trouble with transitions are often making a cosmetic attempt to conceal an underlying organizational problem: not all the so-called "transitional expressions" in the world (*similarly, furthermore, indeed, and the like*) will help if your basic problem is the order of the paragraphs.

But if the logic is there, transitions are easy. Suppose the next paragraph in our essay on Freudian theory goes like this:

Analysis was suited to a more leisurely past, a more verbal culture, an age when the elite felt entitled to every self-indulgent therapy that presented itself. Modern Freudians need to remind themselves that every great religion has adapted itself and its sacred texts to the demands of new times, new scientific discoveries, new modes of thought.

Let's put it together with the first paragraph, and see how the transition practically writes itself:

Freudian theory is often both self-contradictory and dogmatic. Freudians contradict themselves whenever they speak of analysis as "The Cure" and at the same time encourage patients to think of analysis as an open-ended process, often lasting for decades. They're maddeningly dogmatic when they meet every criticism with a reference to one of their sacred texts, as if the great Sigmund had an answer for every problem in the modern world.

But Sigmund didn't, and neither do modern Freudians. Analysis was suited to a more leisurely past, a more verbal culture, an age when the elite felt entitled to every self-indulgent therapy that presented itself. Modern Freudians need to remind themselves that every great religion has adapted itself and its sacred texts to the demands of new times, new scientific discoveries, new modes of thought.

Transitional expressions such as *likewise, similarly, in addition, consequently, accordingly, admittedly, although, indeed, chiefly* (and many others) can be very useful, especially if the relation between sentences or paragraphs may not be immediately clear to the reader, or if you want to emphasize certain aspects of these relationships. But there's no substitute for a coherent organization of your paragraphs themselves and of the sequence in which you place them.

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