

Improving Coherence Between Sentences

1) Repeat a word from the earlier sentence.

My opponent argues that this proposal would *cost* the state at least \$3 million. Actually, the *cost* would not exceed \$1 million.

The class stared at the instructor with expressions that mutely cried out, "Please *clarify* these points!" But *clarification* was precisely what this instructor habitually disdained.

2) Use a pronoun to refer to something in the earlier sentence.

The new contract delighted the teachers. But *it* infuriated the superintendent of schools, the principals, and all the assistant administrators.

3) Use words related in meaning to the earlier sentence.

Corporations have sought to improve their image with college students. But many students still remain cool toward *business* as a vocation.

He has begun to *question* his family's values and middle-class values in general. This *skepticism* has been both harmful and beneficial.

4) Use words that echo an entire idea from the earlier sentence.

In the last scene, Jake risks his life for his friends. This *heroism* clashes oddly with Jake's earlier cynicism.

King Charles understood neither the temper nor the strength of the forces he sought to control. This *faulty assessment* led to his downfall.

5) Use demonstrative adjectives (this, that, these, those, etc.) where possible. (But try not to use them by themselves.)

The new Tortoise four-cylinder engine consumes amazingly little oil. *This* feature is one reason for the popularity of *that* remarkable engine.

6) Use "markers" or cues, that indicate how two sentences relate to each other.

E.M. Forster was a man of exceeding kindness. *But* it would be a mistake to look upon his kindness as a sign of weakness.

Kevin didn't even smile when he saw the new bike. *Not only that*, he didn't thank his grandmother for the gift.

The Known-New Contract

Try to keep the stress on the new information in the sentence. In practice, this usually means that known information should fall at the beginning and new information at the end of sentences. Adhering to the “known-new contract” will help increase linear coherence in your writing (i.e., coherence between sentences).

Known

New

This memo is written

to invite you to a conference on management systems.

The conference

will be held at the Sumpton Ranch, on July 28, from 9 to 5.

You

will be introduced to how

these systems

can be used to store and organize client data.

In the example below, new information is in italics.

Working a typewriter by touch, like riding a bicycle or strolling on a path, is *best done by not giving it a glancing thought*. Once you do, *your fingers fumble and hit the wrong keys*. To do things involving practiced skills, you *need to turn loose the systems of muscles and nerves responsible for each maneuver*, place *them on their own and stay out of it*. There is not real loss of authority in this, since you get to decide whether to do the thing or not, *and you can intervene and embellish the technique any time you like*; if you want to ride a bicycle *backward* or walk *with an eccentric loping gait giving a little skip every fourth step, whistling at the same time*, you can do that. But if you concentrate on the details, *keeping in touch with each muscle, thrusting yourself into a free fall with each step and catching yourself at the last moment by sticking out the other foot in time to break the fall, you will end up immobilized, vibrating with fatigue*.

-Lewis Thomas, “Autonomy”

Of course, it's possible to have a text that strictly adheres to the known-new contract, yet doesn't make much sense:

The river is full of pollutants. The pollutants include sewage and industrial wastes. The industrial wastes come from Gopher Chemical. Gopher Chemical makes paper products. The paper products come from the forests of Oregon. The Oregon forests are suffering from drought. The drought may be the result of global warming. Global warming changes seasonal weather patterns.

So you should make sure that the writing is coherent on global and paragraph levels before worrying too much about coherence between sentences.