

Coherence between Paragraphs

You may have been told that each paragraph should have a topic sentence, several body sentences, and a concluding sentence. But this is not necessarily true. Some kinds of paragraphs, such as introductory and transition paragraphs, don't fit this model. And even “expository” (or “body”) paragraphs have additional kinds of sentences, such as “superordinate” sentences (which often create transitions), and “coordinate” sentences (which restate, contradict, contrast, or conjoin statements).

You might think of a paragraph like a cell. Each one has a “nucleus,” or main idea or purpose, and a larger quantity of supporting material. Paragraphs with two or more “nuclei” should be divided, and paragraphs with all supporting material and no nucleus need to be given a single, clearly stated, point or purpose, or joined up with a nearby paragraph which already states that purpose.

In general, paragraphs do move from general, abstract ideas to specific qualification of an idea. Ideally, the more sentences you add to a paragraph, the more your ideas are developed, and the greater the “texture” or “depth” of thought in that paragraph.

But how can you tell if your paragraph is full of “texture,” or just full of barely related stuff? A researcher named Frances Christensen developed one way to tell. Christensen intended his method to be used while writing paragraphs, but it's even more useful for evaluating paragraphs.

Checking Your Paragraphs:

1. Identify the “level of generality” for each sentence in a paragraph.

- 0 - a “superordinate” sentence that sums up the previous paragraph or provides a transition
- 1 - a general sentence that states an important idea
- 2 - a more specific sentence that elaborates an idea in #1
- 3 - an even more specific sentence that elaborates an idea in #2

These “levels of generality” are very much like the levels of an outline. Very often, sentences at the same level of generality have similar sentence structure. These are “coordinating” sentences—they coordinate, or work together, to develop an idea. Sentences at lower levels of generality depend on the topic of high-level sentences. They are considered “subordinate” sentences.

2. Paragraphs with several #1 level sentences may need to be divided into several paragraphs (especially if the #1s are scattered throughout the paragraph, and not clustered together at the beginning).
3. Paragraphs containing #1 level sentences with only one or two #2s and no #3s may not have enough support.
4. Paragraphs with sentences that are hard to classify probably need to be restructured.
5. Paragraphs that have lots of #2 and #3 sentences either need to have a #1 sentence added to them, or they need to be joined with another paragraph.

Remember: Doing this can help you find idea development problems within paragraphs, but it won't help you find these problems in your paper as a whole. To check a whole paper, use a technique like the Descriptive Outline or the Diagnostic Abstract.

Developing Your Paragraphs:

Once you've divided paragraphs that had too many #1 level sentences, you need to develop your ideas more fully. Here are some ways to do that:

1. Add “coordinating” sentences

- Compare your idea to a similar idea
- Contrast your idea with an idea that might look the same at first, but which is really different
- Restate your idea in another way to emphasize what you've just said

2. Add “subordinate” sentences

- Give an example
- State more specifically what you meant, using more vivid, precise nouns and verbs (for example, name the person involved and say what she is doing)
- Give a reason for what you just said
- Tell the results of an action you've just described
- Discuss what caused the action to occur
- Discuss the conditions surrounding the action taking place

Examples:

- 1 Every decade or so the United States of America crosses some portentous new threshold that symbolizes the nation's evolution from one kind of society to another.
 - 2 It crossed one after the Second World War, when for the first time in history American men bought more belts than they did suspenders.
 - 2 It crossed another in the mid-1950s, when the number of tractors on American farms for the first time exceeded the number of horses.
 - 2 Now, in the 2010s, the country faces a new demographic reality; the number of cats in American households is rapidly overtaking, if it has not already overtaken, the number of dogs.
 - 3 According to Pet Food Institute, a Washington-based trade association, there were about 18 million more dogs than cats in the United States as recently as a decade ago, but today there are 56 million cats and only 52 million dogs.
 - 3 Actually, because millions of unregistered dogs and cats--the illegal aliens of the animal kingdom--go uncounted, it may be that dogs still maintain a slight edge.
 - 3 But sales of dog food are holding steady, whereas sales of cat food have been increasing in recent years at an annual rate of five to eight percent.
 - 3 The trend is clear.