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Effective Transitions and Cohesion (aka "FLOW")

Transitions are one of those central elements of written discourse that people often assume are merely cosmetic. We know from discourse analysis that transitions are one of the main textual features that create a sense of cohesion, or "flow," in writing. And far from being superfluous flourishes, effective transitions are much more than a few "magic words." Transitions function as a bridge from one idea to another, yet understanding how they succeed is a key to writing at an advanced level.

The general rule for all cohesion is the KNOWN + NEW formula. This applies from sentence to sentence and across chunks of discourse from the paragraph level on up. We remind the reader of what has been established and then build on that with new information.

[KNOWN] + NEW formula (a simplified example)

…we cannot think about all the possible ramifications of something we are told. So we pay attention to [what interests us].
[This interest] can be expressed in a variety of ways, but one way is to focus on the things you were looking for, ignoring the things you were not prepared to deal with…

To supplement the Known + New formula there are three primary types of cohesion markers, or transitions, between blocks of discourse. It is not the "names" of these transitional tools that are important, but the relative, and hierarchal, power the strategies possess.

RELATIONAL

Relational transitions are represented by the typical "transition words" we have all learned. The emphasis is on the implied relationship between the items being connected, signified by terms such as "in addition" or "moreover." To change directions, the easy cases are "however" and "in contrast to." These are heavily signposted systems of relation we too often assume do the work of connecting all on their own (the magic connector words).

Relational Examples

…this begins to demonstrate the static nature of the current administration. To compensate for this lack of mobility it is recommended that a series of pro-active measures be implemented.

First, the organization should begin a multi-faceted inquiry into the…

Second, it is recommended that all administrative personnel begin a program of…

Finally, this study suggests a yearly review of…

…the current research would indicate an increase in the downward trend in recidivism rates among first-time offenders.

Although recidivism rates appear to be declining in this particular population, previous studies have suggested the opposite to be true. This conflict in forecasting…

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LEXICAL

A stronger form of cohesion comes from bringing ideas forward by repeating the same words for things that have been used previously in the text. Lexical transitions tend to be limited because by repeating the same names and terms, sometimes the discourse doesn't appear to gain any complexity or nuance. Papers organized around the principle of sameness often fall into this pattern. A variant of this is cohesion by demonstrative pronoun reference ("This idea relates to…," "Such complexities result in…". These connectors work, but if we use them too often or trust them to carry complex thoughts, our meaning is often clouded by their imprecision.

Lexical Examples

…and it has also been determined that long—term exposure to diesel fuel emissions is detrimental to the reproductive success of the Cherry Point Herring population.

The full effects of this long—term exposure are difficult to extrapolate due to the complex nature of the…

…individual financial success can then be directly linked to many of the personality traits that are developed while a participant of these social programs.

These personally traits can also be linked to early childhood introduction to…

SEMANTIC

The third kind of transition that interests us (the most accomplished form of cohesion) is based on finding new words and phrases to bring the meaning forward. The discourse evolves because the writer is in a constant state of "renaming" in order to express different nuances of the subject in question, or different perspectives on how their understanding is changing as they write and research.

Semantic Examples

…this kind of understanding involves people who we might label as crazy, people who just rattle on without regard to the world around them.

In the world of computers, we have an analog in machines that do their thing irrespective of the wishes of the user because the user either doesn't know how to communicate instructions or...

 ("machines that do their thing irrespective of the wishes…" renames the idea of "people who just rattle on without regard…")

…the underlying lesson is that it is someone else's responsibility to interpret and give meaning to the swirl of data, events, and sensations that surround us.

America's most fortunate students escape such spoon-feeding, however…

("such spoon-feeding" renames the concept of responsibility presented in the previous paragraph)