

Improving cohesion

How to make your academic writing more cohesive

Read the following texts. Which one conveys information more completely and accurately?

The effects of the Global Financial Crisis were first felt in 2007. Stock markets fell sharply around the world. Australia has experienced a period of relative economic prosperity since 2007. Good business practices lessened the effect of the Global Financial Crisis. There has been a surge in mining investment.

The effects of the Global Financial Crisis were first felt in 2007 as a result of a sharp fall in Stock markets around the world. However, Australia has experienced a period of relative economic prosperity in the same period. This can partly be attributed to good business practices as well as a surge in mining investment, which have lessened the effect of economic downturn.

The second text is more informative and accurate. The first text raises a number of questions:

Did the stock market crash cause the global financial crisis, or vice versa? Doesn't the third sentence (about Australia and the Global Financial Crisis) contradict the first? Does the line about 'good business practice' refer to Australia only, or include other parts of the world? How is the surge in mining investment relevant to the information before it?

The first passage lacks cohesion, in that the connections between the ideas are unclear. The second text employs a number of cohesive devices that answer questions like those above.

Cohesive devices are words and expressions that indicate relationships between parts of text, such as cause and effect, time, addition, or comparison and contrast.

The first text is also somewhat repetitive. Cohesive devices not only reduce repetition but also supply valuable additional information in a few words, and create connections at multiple levels in the text. The next section provides ways that you can achieve more cohesive writing.

Referring backwards

The reader needs to know who and what is being referred to in a text. However, it is not good to repeat the same phrases or words too often, so we use cohesive devices to make references to other parts of a text; such as:

- **Pronouns:** *it, he, she, his, her, they, their* etc.
- **Demonstratives:** *this, that, these, those*
- **Articles:** *a, the*
- **Adverbs:** *previously, subsequently*

For example:

*The Australian prime minister has called an early election. **The date** was selected to coincide with the start of the Olympic Games. **This decision** was based on the views of **his** ministerial advisors, who predicted that voter confidence in the government's policies would be strong at **this time**. **As previously mentioned**, decisions on the timing of elections are based on predictions of voter confidence in the existing government.*

Comment: In the text **The date** refers back to an early election; **This decision** refers to the prime minister having called an early election; **His** refers to the Australian prime minister; **this time** refers to the start of the Olympic Games; **'As previously mentioned'** refers to all of the earlier information about the selection of election dates.

Looking forwards

We often use words and phrases to flag new information for the reader. This helps make a smooth transition from one point to another. Such phrases include: *the following, as follows, below, next, subsequently*. Examples:

*The **following** dates have been proposed for the forthcoming election: September 8, September 15 and 3 October.*

*The results of the analysis of voter confidence are shown in Table 1 **below**.*

*The **next** issue to be discussed is the influence of the media on voter confidence in the government.*

Avoiding repetition

To emphasise or focus of attention on a part of text, we sometimes repeat the same word or phrase. But we also try to avoid too much repetition by using words and phrases with similar meaning (synonyms).

Example: *'The government's election campaign commenced with a media blitz outlining a series of election promises. This beginning to the campaign sparked numerous media commentaries.'*

Comment: The word 'campaign' repeated in the second sentence continues the topic of the first. Replacing 'commenced' with 'beginning' adds variety, but also keeps a focus on the topic.

Synonyms and synonymous phrases can also demonstrate your ability to evaluate and think critically:

Example: *'The conflict began in the Bay of Pigs in 1961. This unsuccessful invasion was...'*

Comment: The use of 'invasion' tells us something about the nature of the conflict, as well as the writer's opinion of it. Notice also how addition of the single adjective 'unsuccessful' neatly summarises the outcome of the conflict.

Synonyms can also give a richer understanding of the subject matter to your reader through categorisation and contextualisation:

Example: *'...through the use of tariffs and import quotas. These forms of protectionism can ...'*

Transitional devices / Connecting words

Academic writing usually deals with complex ideas. To enable the reader to follow your thoughts and the connections between them, they need to be clearly and smoothly linked. To join ideas and sentences, we use a number of connecting words and phrases. For example:

- **and** – to add information
- **however** – to show contrast
- **therefore** – to show cause and effect
- **although** – to qualify
- **because** – to show cause and effect
- **whilst** – to signal concurrency

Example: *Although the government was elected for a three-year term, the Prime Minister decided to hold an early election. At the same time, the opposition parties, which had anticipated this move, had been planning their own election campaigns, however, they had not expected such immediate public support.*

For a more detailed explanation of these transitional devices, see the Academic Skills flyer '**Connecting and Reporting.**'

Repeated / parallel structures

Repeated (or parallel) grammatical structures often indicate that statements are closely related. Repetition can be used as an emphatic device.

Examples:

When editing your writing, notice what you have repeated, what you have omitted and what you have not expressed clearly.

Notice how the word **what** is repeated here to really drive home the point.

*Just as **overusing** spices ruins a recipe, **overusing** a **thesaurus** can weigh down good writing. It is easy to spot injudicious use of a **thesaurus**.*

Notice how the use of **overusing** transfers from one context to another.

Strategies to improve cohesion

1. Select a piece of writing (textbook or journal article) from your area of study.
2. Choose a paragraph and underline or **highlight** all the different forms of cohesion used (*reference, connectives* and *parallel structures*).
3. Which forms are the most common?
4. Choose a couple that you think are effective and practise using them in your own writing.
5. Try to use a variety of ways to show the relationship between your ideas.

Using the work of other writers as a model for stylistic and cohesive features is how all good writers learn their skills. It is plagiarism, however, if you copy another writer's information or ideas and present them as your own.

Further resources

Jordan, R.R. (1990). *Academic Writing Course*. London: Collins

Taylor, G. (1989). *The Student's Writing Guide for the Arts and Social Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

University of Wollongong. (2001). *Effective Writing*. Retrieved June 8, 2011 from <http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/main.html>

University of Wollongong. (2001). *Cohesive Writing*. Retrieved June 8, 2011 from learning.uow.edu.au/resources/LD/Cohesive3.pdf

Gillett, A. (2011). *Using English for Academic Purposes*. Academic Writing. Retrieved June 8, 2011 from <http://www.uefap.com/writing/writfram.htm>

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