PAPER COHESION & FLOW

Problem

In paper-writing, one of the biggest difficulties is keeping your ideas clear and organized from beginning to end. It is easy to lose track of your purpose, especially in a longer paper. This can result in paragraphs that do not support your thesis, that are not well ordered, or whose point is unclear. Your purpose or main idea may even have shifted by the end of your draft.

Solutions

MAKE AN OUTLINE after writing a draft to identify gaps in overall logic or development, as well as problems with the sequence and flow of ideas from paragraph to paragraph.

• Start by summarizing each paragraph of your paper in a short phrase. If you can’t, make a note to clarify the purpose of that paragraph later. If a paragraph has more than one main idea, consider separating it into multiple paragraphs.

• Compare your thesis and conclusion: Do they emphasize the same controlling idea? It’s not uncommon to discover your “real” thesis only at the end of your first draft.

• Check your brief paragraph summaries against your clarified thesis. Is each paragraph clearly connected to the thesis? Are any important points missing? Do any points need further development? Does the order of paragraphs make sense?

• Make sure that the main idea of each paragraph is clearly stated in a topic sentence or early in the paragraph. The main idea should not be hidden or buried in the middle of the paragraph.

Once your main ideas are in place, MAKE THE PROGRESSION OF IDEAS CLEAR to your readers by using a variety of strategies.

• PARALLELISM: Use similar sentence patterns to introduce structurally equivalent points.

    One explanation for increasing rates of anorexia is...
    Another explanation for increasing rates of anorexia is...

    Jack is a character who thinks only of himself.
    Alice is another character who always thinks of her own needs first.

• REPETITION OF KEY WORDS: Use an important word or two from the end of the previous paragraph in your topic sentence.
Final sentence of one paragraph: Thus Alice represents all people whose curiosity leads them into situations that they are unprepared to deal with.

Topic sentence of next paragraph: Being unprepared also creates difficulties for Rowena, the protagonist of the novel ....

• GIVEN-NEW: Briefly refer to the topic of the previous paragraph before introducing the topic of the current paragraph.

First body paragraph: description of anorexia and how it is debilitating

Topic sentence of next paragraph: While experts agree that anorexia is a debilitating illness [previous topic], there is less agreement about why it occurs [new topic]. Some experts blame the advertising and entertainment industries for their startlingly thin models and actresses.

Topic sentence of next paragraph: In addition to social causes [previous topic], family dynamics [new topic] may also trigger anorexia.

• PREDICTION: Use the last sentence of a paragraph to predict the topic of the paragraph that follows. Be careful, because doing this does not eliminate the need for a topic sentence in that next paragraph.

End of one paragraph: Clearly, anorexia is a debilitating illness, but what causes it?

Next paragraph: Many theories about the cause of anorexia have been proposed. [Paragraph continues with a discussion of various theories...] All these theories, however, lack a key element—the complex relationship that teenage girls have with sexuality.

Topic sentence of next paragraph: Dealing with emerging sexual feelings can be very confusing for adolescents.

TRANSITION CLEARLY BETWEEN SECTIONS OF A LONGER PAPER.

In a longer paper, it may be appropriate to write a transition paragraph between major sections of your paper to help keep the reader on track. Such paragraphs usually summarize the material already covered and preview where the discussion will go next. In some disciplines, it may also be appropriate to use section headings. Review the literature in your field to learn typical conventions for organization.

For more information: