



## Teaching with Writing (TWW) Tip

### Helping Students to Improve Cohesion

Readers can often detect the sense of “flow” in a well-written document. Perhaps more importantly, readers are adept at detecting the absence of flow, often noting when writing without flow seems stilted, choppy, or underdeveloped. But what is flow, and how do we encourage students to create it? This month’s tip will focus on teaching students to understand flow and improve their revision processes by building cohesion.

#### **What is “flow,” and what textual features make it work?**

When discussing flow, writing professionals often use the terms cohesion and coherence. Cohesion describes the relationship between sentences or smaller units of text. When present, cohesion helps us move easily from one sentence to the next and maintain a sense of momentum. Coherence describes how all the features of the text work together to accomplish a purpose—the sense that all the necessary elements are there. In his book *Style*, [Joseph M. Williams](#) describes cohesion as the neat connection of sentences, like the cohesion of two Lego bricks, while coherence is the sense that all the pieces add up, like the way multiple Lego bricks create a car, boat, or house.

One of the most important lessons we can teach our students is that cohesion and coherence are the products of effective revision. We should not expect our documents to be cohesive in a first draft or that our writing will be coherent from the moment we hit the keyboard. Teaching students to identify practices for building cohesion in good writing is an effective way to prepare them for their revisions.

#### **Three revision strategies for improving cohesion: Repetition, Known-to-New, and Transition words**

*Repetition:* When revising a paragraph, one of the simplest strategies for producing cohesion is to look for repeated words. If a word appears several times in a paragraph, chances are that word represents something like the topic or focus of the paragraph. Although a great deal of repetition in vocabulary, sentence length, and sentence structure can be dull, maintaining consistent vocabulary while varying sentence length and structure helps to build flow.

In class, identify an effective paragraph of writing in your field and ask your students to underline repeated words to find what makes that paragraph cohere:

Dark matter is the elusive stuff in the Universe that interacts through gravity like ordinary matter but doesn’t emit or absorb light. Astronomers detect its gravitational influence, but they literally don’t see or feel it. Dark matter carries five times the energy of ordinary matter, but its interactions with the matter we directly experience are extremely feeble. Probably billions of dark matter particles pass through each of us every second. Yet no one notices that they are there. The effect of even billions of dark matter particles on us is minuscule. (Lisa Randall, [How Dark Matter Gave Shape to the Universe](#))

Randall’s paragraph repeats the term “dark matter” four times in six sentences, sometimes as a noun and the subject of a sentence, other times as an adjective along with particles. In this case, repetition improves cohesion without becoming redundant.

*Known-to-new:* A second strategy for building sentence-level cohesion is to structure sentences so that information known to the reader is at the beginning, and new information is clustered near the end. This known-to-new construction makes it easy for readers to connect sentences. For example:

One of the most important American painters of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was Jean-Michel Basquiat. Basquiat began his career as a graffiti artist, painting on Manhattan structures with the tag SAMO. His SAMO street art garnered the attention of New York media elites, and he quickly moved into studio art and the New York gallery scene. It was in this context that he first met Andy Warhol, who became a friend and collaborator.

**Known → New**

American artists → Basquiat

Basquiat → SAMO

SAMO → Gallery scene

Gallery scene → Warhol

Students can practice these constructions in the context of their own work. An added benefit of this strategy is that it encourages students to vary the subjects of their sentences and their construction without losing focus or emphasis.

*Internal transitions:* Finally, encourage your students to look for and to use transition words. Transition words both connect sentences together and preview the relationship between them. Transitions can provide additional information, draw a contrast, illustrate sequences, or note causes and effects. A comprehensive list of common transitions can be found [here](#). Asking students to identify and underline transition words can also assist in helping students to see if, where, and how their writing coheres.

**Learn more:**

- Thomas Christiansen, [Coherence: A Discourse Perspective](#)
- Kim Sydow Campbell, [Coherence, Continuity, and Cohesion: Theoretical Foundations for Document Design](#)
- Joseph M. Williams, [Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace](#)

**Further support**

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*Our purpose is to provide practical strategies for teaching with writing. Our goal is to offer timely and pragmatic support to faculty members and instructors who teach with writing in undergraduate and graduate courses in all disciplinary areas.*