Learning Commons:Writing Centre/Style

Unity

In writing, unity refers to whether or not a piece of writing shares the same focus, style, and tone throughout. It is important to be sure that writing is unified at both the paragraph and essay level to ensure that it flows smoothly and that readers do not become confused. Each paragraph should focus on one main idea, with all of its sentences working to illustrate, clarify, explain, or support that main idea. The essay needs to have each paragraph illustrating, clarifying, explaining, or supporting its main idea as presented in the thesis statement. There may, of course, be more than one idea in a paragraph or an essay, but all are focused on one overall main idea; for example, an essay with a main idea of "challenges one faces when learning to scuba dive" might have supporting ideas that include specifics like how to deal with a malfunctioning regulator or coping with fear of drowning.

Example of a Unified Paragraph

"An attempt to address this issue by encouraging captive breeding programs has also met with difficulties. Firstly, despite modern technology and research, many species are still reluctant to breed in artificial surroundings. In the rare breeds, this creates a vicious downward spiral as wild birds are caught to start breeding programs, but viable populations cannot be maintained. Secondly, captive populations are finite units, and careful management of breeding stock is necessary to prevent weakening the genetic base. This level of dedication and expertise, however, requires a great deal of money--something most of us cannot access and relevant institutions are reduced to begging for." Marina Smith, student [In the paragraph above, each sentence supports the idea set out in the topic sentence. When looking for unity in a paragraph, first find the main idea/topic sentence and then look to see how the other sentences work to prove, support, explain, or illustrate that idea.]

Example of a Paragraph Lacking Unity

"Zombies are becoming an important part of popular culture, perhaps as a way of coping with some of the common fears in modern North American culture. Films like Shaun of the Dead and Fido blend comedy with aspects of horror and romance, but still focus on zombies. Simon Pegg has gone on to do other films and is a popular and talented comedic actor. Hollywood is taking advantage of resurgence of interest by remaking several old horror films as well. Television shows like "The Walking Dead" are popular with a wide demographic. Cable channels like AMC and HBO are making more and more quality television programs that deal with difficult and controversial topics in a way that is both entertaining and enlightening." [In the paragraph above, the main idea is set in the first sentence, which suggests that the paragraph will explore the socio-cultural reasons for the popularity of zombies in popular culture. The paragraph goes on to list some popular zombie media, and then veers off into discussing cable programming. Although some of these ideas may be tangentially related to zombies and popular culture, none of them prove, support, explain, or illustrate the main idea that was given.]

Paragraph Coherence

A paragraph is coherent when it flows smoothly in a clear direction and when all the sentences are logically arranged. Consistency in tone, style, and point of view is also necessary for clarity and coherence. There are several ways to undermine paragraph coherence:

- Using too many short, choppy sentences
- Organizing your sentences in an illogical sequence
- Using weak transitions that fail to suit your purposes, or not using transitions at all
- Switching point of view (example: "One should not purchase a fixed-gear bicycle if you are going to be going up and down hills frequently.")
- Alternating between different tones and styles

Example of a Coherent Paragraph

"Canadian software companies have been facing several tough challenges recently because of 'brain drain,' and the monopoly held by American corporations. 'Brain drain' is a catchy new term for the practice of American companies enticing brilliant Canadian doctors, scientists, researchers, programmers, and business people to cross over the border into the United States. The U.S. firms lure the Canadian talent with the competitive research and business edge that many such companies have as a result of industry monopolies. Simply put, Canadian companies are being soundly beaten because they find themselves on a playing field that is not always level." [Notice how each sentence flows logically into one another. The paragraph stays consistent with both the content and the organization of the topic sentence.]

Example of a Paragraph Lacking Coherence

"Canadian software companies face several tough challenges in the new millennium because of 'brain drain,' and the monopoly held by their American counterparts. However, the Canadian dollar is getting stronger. 'Brain drain' is a bad thing. Our greatest resources are leaving. Microsoft is squeezing out its competitors. In comparison, if the 'brain drain' continues, Canadian companies will find it difficult to produce innovative software. If the dollar doesn't stay strong, it will hurt us. It will help the Americans." [The paragraph above is incoherent because it lacks unity, lacks variety in sentence structure, organizes ideas illogically, lacks transitions that show the connections between ideas, alternates between formal and informal style, and uses both third person and first person point of view inappropriately.]

Transitions

Strong transitions are important not only for unity, but to ensure that readers fully understand the ideas and information being shared in a piece of writing. A transition can be a single word or a phrase, sentence, or group of sentences that lets readers know how two ideas or pieces of information are related. When creating transitions, remember that the connections between ideas that are clear to you may need to be explained to readers. Transitions should always show relationships between ideas and information clearly and concisely. Below is a list of some common transition words and the proper contexts to use them in:

- To give examples: for example, specifically, for instance, thus, to illustrate, namely
- To give additional information: also, further, in addition, moreover, and
- To show how things are related in space: above, below, here, there, opposite
- To show how things are related in time: after, before, meanwhile, in the past, later
- To show contrast: but, however, in contrast, on the other hand, even so
- To show comparison: similarly, also, in the same way, likewise, in the same manner
- To show results: thus, therefore, as a result, consequently, to this end

- To show summary: in summary, hence, in conclusion, finally, all in all

Development

Once a main idea is developed and research is out of the way, it is time to focus on development. Although it may seem daunting at first, drafting and developing your ideas becomes easier with practice, a bit of planning, and a good understanding of the rhetorical strategies you are using. A rhetorical strategy is simply an approach to organizing information in a piece of writing. There are different strategies for different purposes, and they can be combined as needed to create the strongest final paper. You may be required to use a specific mode or modes of development in an assignment, so be sure that you have reviewed the assignment requirements carefully and know how much flexibility you have in terms of development. Following is a discussion of the most commonly used rhetorical modes. You will recognize many of them from reading that you have done.

Narration

Narration is a favourite for both writers and readers, because it is engaging and fun to read. Narration is simply storytelling, and it can be used for writing about personal experience or presenting information in a fresh and exciting way.

Ex. The baby crow was the same size as its parents, but clearly lacked their expertise in gathering food. It followed its mother and father, beak open, cawing and begging for one of them to feed it. Its parents, however, ignored its cries, looking around for a morsel of scavengable food to use as the object in a lesson on gathering a meal of one's own.

Ex. The man in the lieutenant's uniform handed me a bulletproof vest and helmet, then laughed when I put them on – they were both ridiculously oversized on my skinny sixteen-year-old frame. The private handed me a towel and told me to wrap it around my head before putting the helmet back on. It was hot, but made the helmet secure, and I thought grimly that it might offer some additional protection should I step on a land mine. The vest, on the other hand, would just have to do. I doubted its efficacy anyway, but its weight was reassuring.

Description

Description and narration go hand-in-hand. The best narration has strong description, and descriptive writing tends to tell a story in addition to painting a picture for readers. Description is beneficial for any type of project and in conjunction with any rhetorical mode, however – illustrating or explaining an idea through specific use of sensory detail helps to clarify any topic. When writing description, remember to be as specific as possible and remember to include details that will help paint a picture for readers.

Ex. Healthy phalenopsis orchid roots are thick and firm, and have the texture of fresh, raw green beans. You need to be careful not to snap them when cleaning the old potting mix away to prepare the plant for its new home. The roots should have a green tip (in fact, the entire core of the root is green) surrounded by a sheath of spongy white material. Any roots that are not firm or that lack green – if you run into a root that feels shriveled and is simply spongy and white, for example – are unhealthy and can be trimmed.

Example and Illustration

Examples and illustrations serve to develop and explain an idea. You may have heard the old writing adage, "show, don't tell." This has been said by writing instructors so often it is cliché, but for good reason – the strongest writing doesn't rely on exposition, but rather on illustration. If you want readers to understand why a law protecting small dairy farmers' land from seizure and development, offer an example of a situation where land was not protected to show the consequences for the farmer, the farm, the animals, the dairy industry, and the community in general.

Ex. A visit to the Vancouver Aquarium shows how the values of the City of Vancouver may differ from those of other cities. One of the first things visitors notice is the focus on sustainability messages in both the information posted around animal habitats and in the shows and presentations given. Visitors also notice the plaques and posters explaining the facility's design and outlining the ways in which the building itself reduces the carbon footprint. Conservation messages are presented in the children's area, with specific ideas for parents and children to easily do their part to protect the environment and the animals they are visiting. In contrast, aquariums in other large cities focus on surprising facts about the animals or on the rarity of the animals they are caring for in order to reinforce the visitor's feeling of value for the admission fee.

Process Analysis

Process analysis either explains how to do something or how a process works. This is one of the few situations where second person point of view is appropriate; since this mode of development requires the writer to walk the reader through something, step-by-step, it is natural to address the reader directly. If you are assigned to write a process analysis, though, be sure you know what point of view your instructor wants you to use. A good process analysis requires strong organization a lot of detail so that readers can follow along and complete the process themselves (if you are writing a "how-to"). You may feel as though you are giving too much detail during certain steps, but remember that readers are unlikely to be as familiar with the process as you are and may not find it intuitive. It is always better to err on the side of giving too many details than too few.

Ex. To make a grilled cheese sandwich, you will need soft bread, the cheese of your choice, butter, and a heavy-bottomed skillet. The first step is preparing the cheese. For best results, the cheese should be grated as this will facilitate quick and even melting. Grate about two ounces of cheese using the coarsest option your grater has. Once your cheese is grated, you will need to prepare the bread. To do this…

Definition

Definition goes beyond simple dictionary definitions to explain a main idea or use of a particular word or concept, especially if those uses are very specific or outside of the ordinary.

Ex. Intelligence is usually thought of as being related to self-awareness, but the ability to solve problems, remember those solutions, and adapt them to new situations may be a more important factor in determining whether or not an animal, especially non-mammalian, has intelligence.

Analogy

Analogy offers a striking comparison between your main idea/topic and something that is similar or something that is more familiar to readers and will help them better understand the topic. When creating an analogy, be sure that you are creating an analogy that will stand up to scrutiny on the part of the readers.

Ex. Sailing on a tall ship is like riding a motorcycle. It is just you and your machine against the elements, and if you are not skilled at piloting your machine, you may run into serious trouble.

Cause and Effect

Cause and effect is exactly what it sounds like: it examines the causes and effects surrounding a specific event or action. When completing a cause and effect analysis, be absolutely sure that you are examining real causes and effects and not falling into the false cause fallacy.

Ex. If one is a jeweler or an aspiring jeweler, building a workbench and setting up a workstation at home is beneficial. Although there may be a great deal of financial outlay initially, having one's own space leads to the effect of increased productivity and enables one to work more conveniently and cheaply in the long run.

Classification

When using classification, you focus on organizing different objects, ideas, etc. by distinguishing feature or characteristics. Classification is useful in conjunction with any of the other modes of development, especially if you are looking at a variety of problems and solutions, some of which share certain important characteristics, or if you are trying to explain the multiple factors affecting an issue.

Ex. There are many approaches one can take to sustainable living; the key is choosing one that works and that one can continue indefinitely. One set of approaches focuses on energy sourcing and use. There are simple things one can do, such as turn out lights when not in a room or shut down a computer monitor that is not in use, but there are also slightly more involved approaches, such as contacting one's local energy provider to see if one can source electricity from bioenergy or wind farms. Energy-based solutions tend to be fairly simple and tend to be more a question of remembering to do something or paying a small extra fee on electric bills rather than requiring a great deal of direct action. Approaching a sustainable lifestyle through waste management may be more complicated…

Comparison and Contrast

This mode asks you as the writer to draw comparisons between and point out differences between a pair or set of ideas, objects, or people. It is especially useful when you need to develop an argument asking readers to choose between one option and another. When making comparisons and contrasts, be sure that you are balancing the points being examined. For example, if you want to discuss Leica cameras versus SLR, you could look at the shutter material and mechanics for both and have balance. On the other hand, if you looked at the price of the Leica but the body construction of an SLR, the comparison/contrast would no longer have balance.

Ex. Green tea and black tea both have caffeine, but green tea has a good deal less. This makes black tea work well as a morning drink for most people, while green tea is often a preferred drink in the afternoon. Both types of tea come from the same plant, camellia sinesis, but they are processed differently, giving each their distinctive flavours. Green tea tends to be fresh and bright, with a taste some describe as "grassy", while black tea is robust and may have a "malty" or "roasty" flavour with a heavier mouthfeel. Both teas take well to the addition of external flavours, such as fruits or herbs.

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