

## PARAGRAPH UNITY AND COHERENCE

Paragraphs should have both **coherence** and **unity**. A paragraph with **unity** develops a single idea thoroughly and links it to the rest of the paper. Paragraph **coherence** is achieved when sentences are ordered in a logical manner and when clear transitions link sentences.

### Paragraph unity:

- Develop a paragraph around a major idea. Express this idea in the topic sentence.
- Make the relationship between the main idea of the paragraph and the thesis of the paper clear. Don't assume that the reader will "get it." Spell it out for him/her.
- Support the main idea of the paragraph with details.
- Create separate paragraphs for those details that explore your topic from different perspectives.
- Eliminate sentences that do not support the main idea. Alternately, you may revise the main idea to include those sentences.

Look at the following examples from a paper that has the thesis: "Despite the amount of foreign aid pouring in, social conditions in Zeeland remain bleak because the aid is used for military purposes."

#### Example 1 (without unity)

Robert Bee wrote, "The Zeeland massacre illustrates the need for greater control and vigilance." This is related to the thesis. Some 20,000 people disappeared from the villages. Financial mishandling can lead to great misfortune. Corruption in the government was exposed repeatedly to no avail. A police force, under orders to eliminate suspected terrorists, grabbed political dissidents and their families.

#### Example 2 (unified)

The pogrom of May 3, 1987 exemplifies how foreign aid funds were appropriated for repressive rather than social development purposes. On that day, some 20,000 people were abducted from villages in the countryside, charged as traitors and summarily executed. Then governor-for-life Zeely Zeelafsun had recently used \$5 billion in aid to create a standing paramilitary police force. Without some restrictive control over the aid, human rights organizations were unable to prevent the buildup and unleashing of this disaster. Robert Bee, the director of the Development as Freedom Foundation wrote, "The Zeeland massacre illustrates the need for greater control and vigilance."

In the first paragraph it is hard to tell what the topic sentence is, let alone how all the sentences belong together. The reader is not informed who Robert Bee is. The words "related to" in the second sentence don't give the reader any sense of what the relationship is. The second paragraph provides a tight topic sentence that links the main idea of the paragraph to the central argument of the paper. It eliminates details that do

not fall under the topic and adds details that are relevant to the reader's understanding of the events and their relation to foreign aid.

## Paragraph coherence:

Decide on an order for your sentences that will best develop the paragraph's main idea. Your supporting sentences are raw materials. They will not make sense to a reader unless they are put in order.

This order could be based on several factors:

- **Chronological sequence.** This is useful for describing a sequence of events.
- **Modified chronology.** Sometimes a major idea presented early in a paragraph can be supplemented with necessary background information.
- **Spatial position of different objects.** This method is useful for description.
- **'Conversation' between different experts.** By moving between a series of key positions, a writer can establish a sense of dialogue and develop a complex argument.
- **Logical form of argument.** Some form of logical proof, like a syllogism, can serve as the basis for order.

Once you have put your sentences in order, express the connections between them with transitional words or phrases. Think of these as signposts to guide the reader through your paragraph. They should be clear.

### Examples (transitions in bold):

#### 1) Chronological sequence

*Topic sentence:* Our journey was filled with misfortune and luck.

- **After the car broke**, we had to walk several miles.
- **Having eaten little for lunch**, we were soon wearied.
- **While we wanted to continue toward town**, we had to rest.
- **It was at that moment** that a trucker offered us a ride.

#### 2) Expert Conversation

*Topic sentence:* Karl Marx and Michel Foucault produced influential and superficially similar but ultimately conflicting understandings of the way that power struggles determine truth.

- **Marx, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, asserted** that truth was the product of conflicts between classes, or groups of people positioned differently in historical economic power arrangements.

- **While agreeing with** Marx's recognition of the way that power struggles and history alter truth, Foucault was more skeptical about Marx's identification of classes as the primary actors in the struggle.
- **Instead,** Foucault suggested that an examination of the claims made about sexuality and appropriate punishments revealed a complex give and take between various social groups and interests, all of which sought to establish dominance by controlling meaning.
- Marxist critics of Foucault **argue in response** that removing the focus from class eliminates a broad view of social conflict necessary to seeing how economic and political changes shape our everyday understanding.