My Transitions Still Suck, but Syntax, Grammar, and Structure have Improved

This course has been a whirlwind of emotions. I was initially stressed by the workload after reading the syllabus, but then felt relief after the rhetorical analysis (the papers were not that stressful). Happiness set in when I was “forced” to read papers that were already on my reading list. And satisfaction has been the latest emotion while writing this final paper. I have learned so much in such a short amount of time, so I am grateful for that, yet with each assignment my pride wanted me to do better than I did. My main pain point with writing is transitions; and I am sure this paper has many points that could flow smoother. Though I am not sure how to create better transitions yet, many other aspects of my writing have improved tremendously.

I have always seen myself as a strong writer, so when I came to this course I expected to breeze right through it. However, this has been the toughest writing course I have ever taken. My previous courses had assignments that were more spread out. So there was more time between each assignment to actually write them. Past courses also had fewer assignments and each was smaller in word count. Suffice to say, I did not breeze on by this course. Many long nights were spent reading and revising drafts. Difficulty notwithstanding, I have learned so much over the past 10 weeks. I have learned that I am weak with transitions, but pretty good at spotting improvements for active voice. Paying more attention to active voice has made be a better writer and communicator in general. The meaning of my sentences has also become clearer through better use of punctuation and grammar. But, the biggest improvement I have made is by structuring my thoughts with a layout before the initial draft and including a roadmap as the thesis.

Try as I might, I cannot figure out transitions. From the rhetorical analysis to the magazine article – and everything in-between – I have struggled with transitioning between sentences, paragraphs and overall ideas. Each review has said that my work would be stronger with better transitions. All four of the critiques have also mentioned how poor my transitions have been or how much better my papers would be with transitions. I think part of my problem is that my writing so far in life has just been a brain dump. I have only been concerned with ensuring that the high level concepts are conveyed. I can't see the trees for the forest. I need to take the time to assure that each sentence flows from the previous to the next. I do not want to go about improvements here blindly, so I have picked up a few books from the library about technical writing. Engaging this material should help me understand how to make better transitions from one sentence to the next, one paragraph to the next and finally one idea to the next.

Even though I still struggle with transitions, I have become pretty good at noticing passive voice and rewording it to active voice. For example, my midterm was littered with elbows and “it is” phrases. The voice was so passive primarily due to the time crunch. However, even the first draft of this final had many “it is” and “there are” phrases strewn about. After incorporating the midterm into the magazine article, I spotted many (though not all) of the passive voice sentences and revised them for more active voice. Paying closer attention to the words and the tone being conveyed has not only improved my writing, but I have become a better communicator in general. Emails to coworkers and friends are now less stodgy. And my speech takes on a more active voice. I was not expecting a writing course to change my speaking tone, but I am pleased that it have.

This course has not only modified my verbal communication, but also made my writing clearer. Before the grammar talks that we performed in class and the reviews we did, I had no intuition about when to use certain punctuation like dashes and parentheses. My go to punctuation was the comma, and it led to some awkward sentences. An example is from my literature review where I have the sentence, “This construction gives rise to a much more general way of reasoning about computations than the current methods, which include monadic effects.” A better option would be, “This construction gives rise to a much more general way of reasoning about computations than the current methods (including monadic effects).” The additional information isn't absolutely vital to understanding the concept, so it can be relegated to parentheses. I also struggled with demonstrative adjectives. In fact, I find that I still craft sentences with demonstrative adjectives that have no subject. These sentences usually turn out hard to read, but thankfully a few revisions catch most of the mistakes. Increasing the variety of punctuation and better grammar has made my writing a bit more understandable.

However, the greatest improvement to my writing has been planning out the structure of the paper before writing it. With a bit of a backbone, creating and supporting a large essay is much easier for me than letting the words flow freely. Free-writing allows random thoughts in my head to come out on paper in an arbitrary order. Once the thoughts are on paper, I have a hard time reconstructing my original idea. Constraining my thoughts to fit certain points of the paper structure increases the coherence of the overall idea. This process cannot really be seen in my classwork, except for the midterm. I did not prepare well for the midterm and the writing reflected that. Many of the ideas were haphazardly thrown together. And the transitions were worse than normal. However, the magazine article was quite a bit better. The magazine article built upon the midterm and smoothed out many of the rough edges. This difference between the initial writing (the midterm) and the first draft (the magazine article) is what went on behind the scenes for all of my other assignments. Including a roadmap as the thesis has also been pivotal to increasing my writing abilities. I noticed the difference more by reading other people's papers than I did when reading through my own. With a clear roadmap new readers can follow the ideas presented in the paper much easier. This additional structure has lead to papers with a higher level of clarity and conciseness.

**The Intersection of Algebraic Effects, Dependent Types, and Monad Transformers**

I started out with dependent types for the rhetorical analysis and literature review. There is a good amount of information available on these topics. And since they are relatively new developments in type theory, the research is still new enough to be applicable. However, even some older research is still applicable because these concepts have not been explored in full depth yet. It's sort of like the resurgence of Artificial Neural Networks and deep learning in machine learning. Most of the research on these topics is decades old, but it has only recently become technologically feasible to actually implement and explore the ideas further.

For the midterm and magazine article, I decided to switch gears and look at the differences between algebraic effects and monad transformers. I thought these were way more accessible than dependent types. Looking back on it now, I have a very nice metaphor for dependent types involving spell-check, grammar-check and concept-check (made up to show what dependent types are like) that I could have used that would have made these two papers much more understandable. The same caveats about research applies here. There is a good deal of information available, but it's a bit older only because the ideas haven't been explored fully yet.

I looked mostly in the ACM database for these papers, so don't be afraid to find a topic that seems obscure, but that you are passionate about.

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