Writing Efficient Transitions (Paragraph to Paragraph) by Dr. Marylynne Diggs

http://web.clark.edu/mdiggs/102/trans.htm

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Writing Efficient Transitions

Paragraph-to-paragraph and "global" (or multi-paragraph to multi-paragraph) transitions are among the most important, yet most poorly taught, poorly executed strategic elements of an essay. The most ineffective transitions are those that attempt to create a seamless, undifferentiated movement from the topic of one paragraph into the topic of the next paragraph or section of the paper. In fact, many teachers suggest that students create this seamless transition without thinking about its effects. Seamless transitions that create an undifferentiated emphasis from one paragraph to the next create confusion, not clarity. Rather than striving for seamlessness and undifferentiated emphasis in a paper, you should try to emphasize both the distinctions and the logical connections simultaneously.

One way of understanding this is to imagine a construction or room renovation project. Most rooms have both walls and doorways. Walls are typically undifferentiated surfaces in which the seams in sheet rock or drywall have been taped and covered up with plaster and paint. Doorways, on the other hand, have clear delineations and hardware that signal how the doors open and which direction they will swing. When it comes to transitions, many people try to create paragraphs that look like a long, undifferentiated wall surface. However, rather than creating a wall—in which the seams between sheets of dry-wall are taped, covered with plaster, and painted over to create the illusion of a single, uninterrupted surface—a writer should create transitions that are more like doorways. They are clearly delineated, they swing in a specific direction, and the location of handles and hinges provide clues regarding how the door articulates in its frame. When you write transitions, imagine carefully designed doorways that provide efficient access between ideas.

Please note: This exercise will be very difficult if your paragraphs are not well organized internally or from one paragraph to the next. If you suspect that this is a problem in your paper, check out Organizing Info and Paragraphs first. Then return to this page when you think everything is in the right place but just needs to feel more connected.

Ineffective Transitions

Notice the examples of ineffective and effective transitions in the following examples. All of the examples use a paragraph on gun control as a solution to school violence and a paragraph on the role of the family in preventing school violence. The examples at the bottom of the page move from multiple paragraphs on one aspect of the issue to multiple paragraphs on a different aspect of the issue of school violence. After exploring these examples, look at the places in your paper where you move from one paragraph or section on one sub-topic to a new paragraph or section on a new sub-topic. Work on creating efficient transitions at these junctures.

**Avoid the Transitional Paragraph:** Many students have been taught that a transition is a *paragraph* that summarizes what the paper has discussed up to a specific point and what it will discuss from that point forward. However, a full paragraph of transition is rarely necessary except in longer works, such as a 150 page Master's thesis or a 300 page book.

**Avoid the End of Paragraph Transition:** Another ineffective transition strategy that students often learn is placing a sentence at the end of one paragraph that summarizes the paragraph below it. This strategy is ineffective because it often ruins the unity of the first paragraph and makes the topic sentence of the following paragraph seem repetitive.

[last sentence from one paragraph]

....Other researchers suggest that better family values are more important than better gun legislation.

[first sentence from next paragraph]

Better family values could help prevent school violence....

**Avoid using a word at the end of one paragraph that will be important in the next paragraph:** To avoid the tedious repetition characteristic of the strategy described above, students often try to leave more subtle hints about the next paragraph as they close a paragraph. This strategy rarely works because, like the example above, it either ruins the unity of the first paragraph or it misrepresents the relationship between the ideas, perhaps even using the word in a forced way.

[last sentence from one paragraph]

....Gun control advocates should think about families and values too.

[first sentence from next paragraph]

Family values could help prevent school violence....[Notice repetition and loss of focus in first paragraph.]

OR
[last sentence from one paragraph]
    ....Many families don't agree on the value of gun control....

[first sentence from next paragraph]
    Family values could help prevent school violence....[Notice how the meaning of the word "value" changes]

**Efficient Transitions**

More efficient transitions require careful thought about the content and the function of one paragraph or group of paragraphs as well as the paragraph or group of paragraphs that follow it. You should try to maintain paragraph focus and unity while still providing the reader with an accurate link between the paragraphs. If your topic sentences are effective, your transitions establish a link between one topic sentence and the next or from the topic sentence and transition of one multi-paragraph section of the paper to the topic sentence of the next paragraph of the next multi-paragraph section. Thus, the goal in any transitions is not to hide the distinctions and connections. The best way to achieve this is to do the following:

*Place the transition at the beginning of the 2nd of the two paragraphs:* In order to maintain paragraph focus and unity, you should generally place the transition at the beginning of the paragraph that will contain the new sub-topic.

*Create a sentence that reminds readers of paragraph(s) above but has forward momentum leading to the paragraph(s) that follow:* One way to do this is to create a dependent clause that reflects the paragraph(s) above the transitional point and a main clause that reflects the focus of the new paragraph (this can also serve as the topic sentence for the new paragraph). Then work on combining those clauses into a sentence that accurately reflects the logical relationship of the paragraphs. The dependent clause de-emphasizes the paragraphs above (while nonetheless reminding us of them), and the main clause propels us forward into the new topic sentence and paragraph/focus.

*When to use complex sentences and when to use a more simplistic transition:* In paragraph to paragraph transitions, a more simple sentence structure will often suffice when transitioning from a single paragraph to another. In global, multi-paragraph transitions, you might need a complex sentence as a transition between sections of the paper plus a simple sentence as a topic sentence for the immediate paragraph.

**Topic Sentence** from earlier paragraph on gun control as a solution:

    One solution to the school violence problem would be to strengthen gun control laws....

**Transitions at the beginning of new paragraph(s)** on family solutions:

**Transition to Additional Solution**

    In addition to strengthening gun control legislation, we should work on creating better familial relationships to ensure that troubled teens are....

    OR

    Another way to reduce school violence is to create better familial relationships. This could...

**Transition to Better Solution**

    Although gun control could prevent troubled teens from getting guns, a better solution would be to strengthen familial relationships to prevent teens from wanting guns in the first place....

    OR

    A better solution to the problem would be strengthening...

**Transition to an Interim Solution**

    While we wait for congress to strengthen gun control legislation, we should focus on strengthening familial relationships....

**Transition to Alternative Arguments**

    Although these arguments make a good case for gun control, they ignore another solution: strengthening family bonds....

**Transitions** between larger sections of the paper, placed at the beginning of the first paragraph of new section

**Transition from Examples to Causes + Topic Sentence**
Events such as these have led researchers to examine more carefully the causes of school violence. Many are looking at the effects of video games on aggression.

Transition from Causes to Solutions + Topic Sentence
While these causes are still under investigation, the research does point toward several potential solutions. One solution is...