

# Five key strategies for improving academic writing.

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Explorations of Style. A Blog about Academic Writing

## Reverse Outlines

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Over the coming weeks, I will discuss five key strategies for improving academic writing. I have chosen these five simply because they are the ones that I most frequently turn to in my work with students. I have ordered them roughly from global to local, starting with a strategy for overall coherence and ending with common sentence problems. It is generally more efficient to treat broader structural issues before spending time on individual sentences; the structural edit, done right, can dramatically change a text. You do not want to expend energy on sentence-level improvements before making some broader decisions about what will stay and what will go.

The first strategy—and definitely my favourite—is the **reverse outline**. Reverse outlines are outlines that we create from an existing text. Regardless of whether you create an outline *before* you write, creating one *after* you have written a first draft can be invaluable. A reverse outline will reveal the structure—and thus the structural problems—of a text. The steps to creating a reverse outlines are simple:

1. Number your paragraphs. (Paragraphs are the essential unit of analysis here; next week we will look at why paragraphs are so important.)
2. Identify the topic of each paragraph. At this point, you can also make note of the following:
  - a. Is there a recognizable topic sentence?
  - b. How long is the paragraph?
    - i. Does the topic seem sufficiently developed?
    - ii. Is there more than one topic in the paragraph?
3. Arrange these topics in an outline.
4. Analyze this outline, assessing the *logic* (where elements have been placed in relation to one another) and the *proportion* (how much space is being devoted to each element).
5. Use this analysis to create a revised outline.
6. Use this revised outline to reorganize your text.

7. Go back to your answers in **2a** and **2b** to help you create topic sentences and cohesion in your paragraphs.

This strategy is effective because it creates an objective distance between you and your text. A reverse outline acts as a way into a text that might otherwise resist our editorial efforts. As we discussed when we looked at [revision](#), we often find our drafts disconcerting: we know they are flawed but making changes can seem risky. A reverse outline can give us purpose and direction as we undertake the valuable process of restructuring our work.

Next week, we will talk about [paragraphs](#); a sound understanding of paragraph construction can make reverse outlining even more effective.

## Paragraphs

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This week's topic is the importance of the **paragraph** as a 'unit of discourse'. Novice writers tend to think of both full texts and sentences as areas for improvement, but they give less thought to the role of the paragraph. They recognize, of course, that a full text must possess a certain communicative goal, and they understand that sentences are the building blocks of the whole. But paragraphs? In my experience, these intermediate units are consistently neglected. This neglect greatly underestimates the important role that paragraphs play for the reader. A paragraph break means something to a reader; when we move from one paragraph to another, we imagine that we are leaving one thought (or issue or topic or argument or point or perspective or piece of evidence) and moving on to another. We attempt, in other words, to find some unity within a paragraph and to discern some diversity between paragraphs. When the writer has not managed paragraphs well, those attempts will lead us—consciously or not—to be disappointed. Most of us benefit from adding paragraphs to our list of things that must be effective if our writing is to succeed. To that end, here is my list of four things I wish every academic writer knew about paragraphs:

**1. That they are very important.** Simply stated, effort should be devoted to working on paragraphs, as well as on sentences and full papers.

**2. That they usually need a topic sentence.** The 'usually' is there to avoid the appearance of dogmatism, but I do in fact advise writers to start with the assumption that every paragraph will require a topic sentence. The main exceptions are introductory paragraphs (which often, in effect, act as a kind of topic sentence for the whole text), transitional paragraphs (which exist to signal a significant shift in topic), and serial paragraphs (all of which refer back to a single topic).

**3. That they should be thematically linked.** The rest of the sentences should be recognizably about the theme announced in the topic sentence. These thematic linkages should also involve noticeable linguistic linkages, accomplished through strategic repetition and the use of key terms.

**4. That their length is meaningful.** The length of a paragraph should be determined by the demands of content, not by the number of sentences or space taken up on the page. When I ask students for the rationale behind a paragraph break, they frequently say something to the effect of ‘I thought it had gone long enough’. (The phrase ‘my high school English teacher always said ...’ also comes up a lot in this regard, but the ongoing trauma of a high school English education will have to be a topic for a future post!)

Paying more attention to paragraphs will improve their internal cohesion. But this attention to paragraphs is also a key way to improve the overall coherence of a text. As I have said repeatedly, our willingness to revise can be undermined by the difficulty of finding our way into a text. But once that text is reducible to a series of paragraphs—each of which has an explicit role to play—we are better able to think about the overall demands of structure.

Next week, we will talk about making effective [transitions](#) in your writing.

## Transitions

Posted on [February 23, 2011](#) | [1 Comment](#)

This week’s topic is another key strategy: making effective **transitions**. A lack of comfort with making transitions is one of the causes of the short [paragraphs](#) I mentioned last week; when we do not know how to make smooth transitions, we are more likely to add in unnecessary paragraph breaks, imagining that starting a new paragraph will solve the problem. But creating short, choppy paragraphs only exacerbates the problem. Instead, we must focus on creating effective transitions between sentences, which we generally do in one of two ways: we use transition words or we use textual linkages. Both strategies have a role to play, but novice writers, unfortunately, often see transition words as their only way of moving from sentence to sentence. This over-reliance on transition words is actually detrimental to our writing and blinds us to the possibility of using textual linkages to create more meaningful connections between sentences. Transition words are easy and thus allow us to avoid the hard work of grasping the actual connections in our texts. Indeed, texts full of transition words may actually feel choppy because unnecessary transition words can obscure the true nature of the relationship among sentences.

I promise to return to this rich topic in detail in future posts, but for now I will just give a few key principles:

**1. Avoid unclear reference.** The single most important way of linking your sentences is through clear reference. Contrast these two simple examples: ‘A is connected to B. This is...’ and ‘A is connected to B. This **connection** is...’. Without the summary word (‘connection’), we cannot tell whether the ‘this’ in the first example refers to A, to B, or to the connection between them. We call this pattern ‘this + summary word’. There will be times, of course, when the reference is obvious, but generally the reader needs to have reference made explicit. So a simple principle: never leave a ‘this’ orphaned and alone.

**2. Avoid unnecessary transition words.** The transition words most likely to fall into this category are the additive ones: ‘in addition’, ‘also’, ‘moreover’, ‘furthermore’. (Both ‘moreover’ and ‘furthermore’ can be correctly used as intensifiers—where one sentence deepens the claim of the previous one—but they are so often used to indicate simple addition that I am including them here.) My first approach to a word like ‘also’ is to remove it; if you are using it to say ‘here comes another related point’, it is probably unnecessary. If you are instead trying to make a more complicated connection, removing ‘also’ and adding a more substantive indication of that link will be far more helpful to the reader.

**3. Avoid the mere appearance of causality.** When we overuse causal words, we often undermine the actual connection we could be making. When we say ‘A exists. Therefore, I am going to study A.’, we are missing a chance to give an actual rationale for our research. Look closely at your use of causal words (‘therefore’, ‘thus’, ‘hence’) and make sure that they accurately reflect the relationship you are trying to convey.

**4. Use transition words to indicate a change of direction in your text.** Whenever we are disagreeing with ourselves, it is essential that we indicate this to the reader. Consider these simple examples: ‘There is plentiful evidence for A. I think not-A.’ and ‘There is plentiful evidence for A. However, I think not-A.’ The first example sounds like you might be unintentionally contradicting yourself; emphasizing your intentions with a ‘but’ or ‘however’ lets the reader know what you are up to.

I will also make two quick points about other types of transitions.

**Paragraph transitions** generally need to be more robust than those between sentences. This can mean that ‘this + summary word’ becomes ‘this + summary phrase’, where the phrase is a fuller indication of what was discussed in the previous paragraph. It also means that transition words are often out of place in paragraph transitions precisely because they create such a tight relationship. There are, of course, exceptions to this, but as a general rule words or phrases like ‘however’, ‘in other words’, or ‘furthermore’ may puzzle the reader when they appear at the start of the paragraph; at the very least, they may send the reader back to the previous paragraph and that is not the direction in which you want to be pointing your reader.

**Transitions between sections** are a different issue again. Transitions between sections can be made in several ways: at the end of one section, at the beginning of another, or at an earlier point at which an overall structure is created. (For instance, in a literature review, a writer may say that she is going to consider the literature on a certain topic from three different perspectives. The reader will then be fine with three independent sections without any explicit transitions between

them.) One simple piece of advice for section transitions: do not rely on the section headings to accomplish the transition for you. As a rule of thumb, I suggest reading through section (and subsection) headings as though they were not there. Not that they should actually be removed, but rather that the author should make sure that transitions are accomplished in the text, not through headings.

Next week, we will talk about [verbs](#). We will do this by using Williams's simple-but-brilliant principle that the action in our sentences should be expressed through verbs.

## Verbs

Posted on [March 2, 2011](#) | [1 Comment](#)

One of the challenges of writing this blog is going to be the somewhat arbitrary division of topics. My hope is that this initial weakness will ultimately become a strength. At this point, the blog consists of a collection of distinct topics, an arrangement that does not reflect the way writing topics interconnect. But in the long run, I hope that the non-linear form of the blog will actually offer something valuable. By establishing multiple links between posts, I hope to create a cohesive whole, one that allows readers to combine related topics according to their own needs. Stay tuned to see if that actually happens! For now, I am going to try to talk about **verbs** without stealing any thunder from next week's discussion of subjects.

Joseph Williams suggests that we are troubled by writing in which the action is not expressed by verbs. I am going to explore this idea using two examples, one taken from Williams and one adapted from student writing:

1. Our lack of knowledge about local conditions precluded determination of committee action effectiveness in fund allocation to those areas in greatest need of assistance. (Williams, *Style*, p. 17)

According to Williams, most of us will dislike this sentence. While it is a hard sentence to like, Williams's point is that this adverse reaction alone is not a particularly helpful editorial judgment. We need to know what it is about this sentence that does not work. His answer is that the action in the sentence is not expressed through strong verbs. What is the action in this sentence? Someone did not *know* something; something did not *get determined*; someone *allocated* something; some place *needed* something. In each case, however, those actions were expressed through nouns: *knowledge*, *determination*, *allocation*, *need*. Here is Williams's rewrite (emphasis added):

2. Because we **knew** nothing about local conditions, we could not **determine** how effectively the committee had **allocated** funds to areas that most **needed** assistance. (Williams, *Style*, p. 17)

Here is the second example:

1. Although there has long been contestation as to the meaning of literacy, there is some agreement among scholars that this new definition is complementary rather than contradictory to the essence of the term.

Again, we look for the action in the sentence to see whether that action is being expressed through verbs. When we find nouns instead, we can try changing them to verbs: *contestation* becomes *has been contested* and *agreement* becomes *agree*.

2. Although the meaning of literacy **has long been contested**, scholars largely **agree** that this new definition **complements** rather than **contradicts** the essence of the term.

(Note that I have also changed *is complementary* and *is contradictory* to *complements* and *contradicts*. This is a related topic that we will look at in a future post.)

We will return to these sentences next week when we discuss the need for [clear subjects](#).

## Subjects

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Our topic this week is the importance of using clear **subjects** to express the characters in our sentences. ‘Characters’ is Williams’s useful term for the people/places/things/ideas that are doing something in our sentences. Since this discussion of subjects is closely connected to last week’s discussion of [verbs](#), we can now take another look at the same sentences (one taken from Williams and one adapted from student writing):

1. Our lack of knowledge about local conditions precluded determination of committee action effectiveness in fund allocation to those areas in greatest need of assistance. (Williams, *Style*, p. 17)

Last week, we discussed the possibility that our dislike of this sentence stems from its use of nouns to express actions. Williams suggests that our dislike may also stem from a lack of clarity about *who* is doing those actions. So, who is doing something in this sentence? *We* did not know something and thus could not determine something else; *the committee* allocated something; *areas* needed something. However, in the original sentence, those characters were not acting as grammatical subjects. Here is Williams’s rewrite (emphasis added):

2. Because **we** knew nothing about local conditions, **we** could not determine how effectively **the committee** had allocated funds to **areas** that most needed assistance. (Williams, *Style*, p. 17)

Here is the second example:

1. Although there has long been contestation as to the meaning of literacy, there is some agreement among scholars that this new definition is complementary rather than contradictory to the essence of the term.

Again, we look for characters and ask whether those characters are the grammatical subjects of the sentence. If we find no such overlap between characters and subjects, we can rewrite with characters in the role of subjects. The easiest way to start this process is by asking *who or what* the sentence is about; in this case, the opening clause is about the meaning of literacy and the main clause is about what scholars think about that definition. When we rewrite the sentence, we can make those terms into subjects:

2. Although the **meaning of literacy** has long been contested, **scholars** largely agree that this new definition complements rather than contradicts the essence of the term.

Choosing clear subjects can sometimes be more involved than choosing strong verbs. It is, however, so valuable to ask ourselves—especially in the context of [paragraph](#) development—who (or what) is doing something in our sentences. The benefit of thinking about sentences as having characters is that it can reframe writing, even academic writing, as story telling. This reframing is important because someone who is telling a story must be aware of their audience, must be aware of what that audience expects a particular passage to be about. Pushing yourself to define your characters and then to use them as the subjects of strong verbs will allow you to write sentences that are clear and that are much more likely to fit cohesively into a broader piece of writing.