Transitions

The Need for Transitions

All writers want their papers “to flow.” This rather vague phrase usually refers to the idea of continuity and progression to which most writers aspire. Often, a writer will create a well-argued paper, complete with a strong thesis and substantial evidence, only to find the paper “dry.” Other times, the lack of fluidity in an essay may stem directly from weakness in the organization of ideas. In both cases, the effective use of transitions helps immeasurably.

Identifying Connections between Ideas

Just as linked sentences within a paragraph lead the reader, so too must linked paragraphs direct the reader from one idea to another, for no writer can cover up a misdirected argument. The first step in writing a cohesive argument lies in outlining your ideas and organizing them soundly. Take the time to prioritize your arguments; exploit the differences between points, set up comparisons and contrasts, and construct transitions to explain the relationships between your ideas. Let your organization do the transition work for you. Often, you need only to state the relationship between successive paragraphs in order to have a successful transition. For example, a paragraph citing the shortcomings of a state lottery ends:

> The state focuses nearly all its publicity efforts on merchandising a get-rich-quick fantasy, one that will come true for only a handful of people, while encouraging millions of others to think of success as a product of luck, not honest work.

The following paragraph immediately sets up a contrasting view:

> While the shortcomings of the state lottery system are numerous, sound arguments exist for allowing state lotteries to continue and spread.

The reader now sees the relationship between paragraphs and expects to read a defense of the lottery system.

Implementing Transitions

The transition process applies to all types of arguments. If strong evidence is presented in each paragraph, transitions may simply mark the movements from one point to another. If you want to show a cause and effect relationship, you need only express that connection. Whatever relationships connect your ideas should be identified and communicated to the reader. You may add to, emphasize, summarize, or end an argument. Once you know the relationship, the options are plentiful and logical.

Transitional Strategies

The end of one paragraph can set up a clear connection to the next paragraph, whether you aim to reinforce or debunk what has been stated. One way to create a transition is to repeat a key word or phrase from the preceding paragraph. In addition, since all paragraphs should help prove the thesis, another strategy could be to remind the reader of that larger goal.

For example, if my thesis attempts to prove Satan to be a sympathetic character in Paradise Lost, I may move from a paragraph citing Satan's self doubt to another that explains Satan's monologues:

> Because Satan doubts his choices throughout Paradise Lost, he appears human, fallible, and ultimately sympathetic to readers, who identify with the human rather than the superhuman.

> Another characteristic that suggests Milton views Satan sympathetically emerges in Satan’s melancholy monologues. As with Satan’s expressions of self doubt, his monologues illustrate Satan's longing for acceptance in Eden.

In the above transition, I repeated the word “doubt,” employed the transition “another,” and connected both paragraphs to my thesis about Satan's “sympathetic” nature.
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Common Transitional Words and Phrases

To link complementary ideas:
- again, in addition, at the same time, in the same way, similarly, likewise, hence, as a result, furthermore, moreover, just as

To compare:
- also, likewise, similarly, as well as, in much the same way, by the same token, another similarity, as compared with, correspondingly, in relation to

To contrast:
- even though, and yet, but at the same time, despite this fact, in contrast to, in sharp contrast to, on the contrary, on the other hand, although this may be true, nevertheless, after all, instead of, rather, in opposition to, although, but, however, in spite of, still, yet, otherwise, though

To link conflicting ideas:
- in reality, in truth, on the contrary, on the other hand, nonetheless, however, in contrast, but, yet, contrary to, regardless, rather, not, nevertheless, instead of

To demonstrate cause and effect:
- therefore, thus, so, it follows, then, as a result, consequently

To indicate time:
- past, in the past, before, earlier, previously, formerly, prior to, prior to yesterday, recently, not long ago, soon afterward, meanwhile, afterward, until now

To indicate place:
- below, here, there, somewhere, beyond, above, next to, in front of

To indicate sequence:
- first, at first, in the first place, once, to begin with, at the beginning, starting with, initially, from this point, earlier, second, secondly, in the second place, next, after that, subsequently, later on, third, in the third place, last, lastly, at the end, in the end, ultimately, finally, consequently

To repeat:
- all in all, altogether, on the whole, in short, in fact, in particular, that is, to reiterate, to recount, to reconsider, to summarize, to explain, to clarify

To provide an example:
- for example, in one example, as an example, for instance, to illustrate, to show, to explain, to clarify, in other words, to put it another way, to cite a reference, at the same time, more specifically, to be exact, that is

To introduce a logical conclusion or condition:
- since, because, if, provided, as, in the same way, therefore, thus, so, as a result, in consequence, unless, until, when, once

To summarize:
- in brief, on the whole, in short, finally, as stated earlier, most important, accordingly, this, then, hence, as a result, in short, therefore, after all, so

To add a thought:
- also, and, additionally, besides, finally, furthermore, again, moreover, next, too, as well as, in addition to, since, that is, in fact, then

To clarify or emphasize:
- actually, clearly, in other words, of course, too, certainly, without a doubt, truly, in fact, yes, no, definitely, indeed

Transitions as Bridges

One can think of transitions as bridges between sentences and paragraphs for the reader. These bridges show relationships between ideas. You should ask yourself: “How are the paragraphs linked? Do additional connections need to be identified? Do any of the transitional techniques try to create relationships that are not valid?” The best essay appears effortless; transitions that cultivate well-constructed progressions of thought will improve an essay considerably.


The original source for this handout is “Transitions,” by Philip DiGennaro, at http://www.hamilton.edu/writing/transitions.html. Armstrong Atlantic State University Writing Center