

CREATING BETTER FLOW

Flow, or continuity, is the sense that a piece of writing is moving along in a coherent and clear manner. You know a text is flowing when you don't have to work too hard to follow it. Flow is achieved in many ways and can be worked on at any stage of the writing process.

ORGANIZE YOUR THOUGHTS

In university writing you will usually want to group ideas together to make themes or topics. This means most of the things you say about Topic A should go together and most of the things you say about Topic B should go together, and so on. (That's how this handout works, for example.) Organizing your ideas this way helps keep the reader's attention. For tips on planning structure, see our handout called "Outlines: Organizing your ideas."

PROCEED LOGICALLY

Academic writing in Canada follows certain conventions – it is expected that ideas will be presented in a logical, linear way without digressions. If you follow these conventions, your writing will fit with your readers' expectations and it will be easier to understand. A few basic questions can go a long way in helping the logical flow of your writing:

- Does the text show clear relationships between ideas? Cause-effect relationships, for example, or relationships in time, in sequence, in space... and relationships between your evidence and your argument.
- Have you given the reader enough information to understand you and have you given it in the order they need to receive it?
- Is the text behaving predictably? For example, if you tell me you're going to discuss straw bale house design and then go on to discuss bricks-and-mortar houses, do you explain why you're going "off topic"?

For more on common-sense logic, see our handout "Argumentation: The Toulmin Method." For more detail on other kinds of logic – and logical errors – see Michael Austin's Reading the World: Ideas that Matter.

USE META-DISOURSE

Meta-discourse is when you refer directly to the text itself. This can be helpful when you want to orient your reader with phrases such as "in this section...," "see below...," and "as we discussed earlier..." Or perhaps you need to explain why a certain topic has come up: "this may seem unrelated, but...," or "allow me to digress for a moment in order to..."

Next time you are reading, take note of where the text uses meta-discourse to help clarify itself. In fact, why not go back in this very handout and look for examples of meta-discourse?

EMPLOY TRANSITIONS

Transitions are words and phrases used to link one idea to the next or to show a relationship between ideas. Examples include "therefore," "consequently," "moreover," "however," "in addition," "on the other hand," or even "now that we have established that X is the case, let us move on to Y."

Transitions are a great way of creating continuity. They can create confusion, however, if they are not used appropriately – every transition means something unique and changes the meaning and flow of your text, so it's important to use the right one. To get to know transitions a bit better, start trying to identify them in the texts you read, and experiment with using them in your own writing.

MOVE IT ALONG

As much as continuity comes from cohesion, from the “glue” we build our texts with, it also comes from momentum, from a sense of moving on. This can be produced in many ways. Sometimes it's as simple as knowing when to stop talking about one thing and move on to another. Sometimes it means a well placed heading that signals a change. It may come from using a balanced variety in the length and complexity of your sentences and paragraphs. It may even come from varying rhetorical approaches from serious to humourous or from fact-based discussion to personal anecdote.

Flow, continuity, momentum – these are all very complex elements of writing and deserve much more time than this modest little handout can offer – and we are running out of space.... We simply hope to inspire you to look a little closer at the many exciting ways language does what it does.

BONUS TIP:

Try reading only the first sentence of each paragraph. If you had to write a very short summary of your text using just these sentences, would it make sense? Do they proceed in a logical manner? Do they carry your paper's discussion with appropriate clarity and pace like a condensed version of your paper? If you can get these “topic” sentences to tell the main story of your text, you will probably make the whole thing flow much better.