

from *Rhetorical Grammar*, Martha Kolln

## Sentence Cohesion

Sentence cohesion is the ties that connect each sentence to what has gone before--the glue that gives a paragraph unity. Part of that glue is provided by information in the sentence that the reader already knows. This known, or given, information generally fills the subject slot in a sentence; the new information--the real purpose of the sentence--generally comes in the predicate. For example, consider how often the subject slot of a sentence is filled by a pronoun; that pronoun, of course, stands for an antecedent that is known to the reader, a previously mentioned noun or noun phrase:

*The president* delivered his State of the Union message to a joint session of Congress last night. *He* began by discussing the startling political changes that had been taking place in Eastern Europe as the 1980s ended. This diminishing of the Cold War has greatly affected both our economic and our military policies.

The pronoun *he* ties the second sentence to the first; it puts the reader on familiar ground. Now look at the third sentence. It too is connected to its predecessor, this time not by a pronoun but by a new noun phrase in the subject position. But the information is not new; it's a kind of restatement of the preceding direct object. The reader is assumed to know that the two noun phrases,

the startling political changes that had been taking place in Eastern Europe as the 1980s ended

and

This diminishing of the Cold War

have, more or less, the same referent--they refer to the same general concept. Notice too that the writer has marked the subject as "known" by using the pronoun *this* to signal the noun phrase. This is a way of telling the reader, "You're on familiar ground here." Again, the new information in this sentence is in the predicate. Linguists have found this known-new sequence to be so pervasive a feature of prose that it is sometimes referred to as the "known-new contract". The writer has an obligation, a contract of sorts, to fulfil expectations in the reader--to keep the reader on familiar ground. The reader has every right to expect each sentence to be connected in some way to what has gone before, to include a known element.

The kind of known information illustrated in the example--the noun or pronoun that points back to a previous sentence slot--is one of our strongest, most common techniques for establishing cohesion. Another kind of known information consists of common knowledge that the writer and reader share. For example, the opening sentence in that passage could have been followed by a different sentence altogether:

The president delivered his State of the Union message to a joint session of Congress last night. Every seat in the gallery was full. The Cabinet Secretaries and the Joint Chiefs of Staff occupied seats of honor in the front row.

Even though the second and third sentences contain no repeated information, they continue the theme stated in the first sentence, with details that should carry no surprise for the reader. In this case, the known information is the common knowledge about presidential addresses to joint sessions of Congress--information in the public domain.

The cohesion provided by shared knowledge does have its pitfalls for the writer: It is not always as strong a tie as the pronoun or noun phrase that clearly points back. For example, even though the reader of the previous paragraph is not likely to say, "Seats? Gallery? I wonder why I'm reading about full galleries," that new topic may nevertheless have been something of a surprise: it may have thwarted--at least momentarily--the expectations of someone who had been expecting details of the president's message. And sometimes all it takes is one moment of hesitation to produce a sense of awkwardness--and an "awk" in the margin of your essay.

How can the known-new principle of cohesion help you as a writer? Are you supposed to stop after every sentence and estimate the cohesive power of your next subject? No, of course not. That's not the way writers work. But when you are revising--and, remember, revising goes on all the time, even during the first draft--the question of reader expectation is one you will want to keep in mind. You can learn to put yourself in your reader's shoes to see if you've kept your part of the bargain.

In our passage, for example, one way to strengthen the tie between the second sentence--the one about the gallery--and its predecessor is to drop a hint in that opening sentence about what the reader can expect next, to

suggest a direction. As it now reads, the first sentence is no more than a statement of fact. You can often strengthen a topic sentence of this kind by including an opinion, by making the sentence an arguable proposition. Sometimes just a word or two will do:

The president delivered his much anticipated State of the Union message to a joint session of Congress last night.

"Much anticipated" goes beyond the facts of who, when, where, and why. It's an opinion. Now the reader is inclined to respond with "Who says?" or "Anticipated for what reason?" And it carries the suggestion of the audience and what they are thinking, so the sentence about the filled gallery comes as no surprise.

That question of reader expectation revealed a problem with cohesion in the following passage, part of a student's first draft of an essay about laying a carpet. The paragraph before this one explained how to place the tack stripping:

After the tack stripping has been placed correctly, the room is ready for padding. The pad, made of urethane, comes in rolls that are six feet wide and 120 feet long. The customer has his choice of what thickness he wants. There is regular padding, three quarters of an inch thick, and heavy padding, one inch thick. The pad is rolled out from wall to wall. . . .

There is no problem with the general topic sentence. The opening clause ties the paragraph to the previous one. And the second sentence is tied to the first by the known information in the subject: the pad. The reader expects *the pad* or *padding* or *it* to be the subject. The third sentence introduces the idea of thickness, which is new information. But notice that the subject of the third sentence--the customer--is also new information. The reader probably didn't expect that change of topic. The lack of old information should signal the writer of a possible trouble spot, a weakness in cohesion.

Sometimes in paragraphs filled with factual details, such as the dimensions of the carpet pad, you may be tempted to add variety by introducing a completely new idea. In this essay the idea of the customer is certainly relevant, because it is the customer who chooses the carpet and hires the mechanic to install it: the fact of customers for carpeting is within the shared knowledge of writer and reader. But is this the best place in the description to introduce the customer? Probably not. There are, of course, many other features of word choice and grammar and logic that contribute to cohesion within and between sentences and to the coherence of the essay as a whole.

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As an exercise, read the following paragraph and note how the author does (or does not!) tie old and new information together in a cohesive manner. Rewrite the paragraph following the precepts of the "known-new" contract. Is your result more or less clear than the original?

Public and private literacy programs combined have helped only about four million American adults. The special problems literacy programs have to overcome are linked to these results. Irregular class attendance is one such problem. If an adult has small children or must hold down two jobs, class attendance becomes difficult. On the large scale, though, a problem of policy focus exists. Is improving the suggested source of illiteracy – elementary and secondary education – the best public policy focus? Or should gearing itself toward teaching the present illiterate population to become literate be our public policy?