

Campbell's English: COHERENCE NOTES

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Coherence means “understandability.” Coherent writing is clear.

Essayists want to ensure that the audience fully understands all of their ideas. Writing clearly is an art that takes skill and practice. There are a variety of techniques that writers use to develop coherence. Keep the following methods in mind as you write, and as you read the work of others.

1. A clear thesis statement
2. Repetition of key words and phrases
3. Parallel structure
4. Transitional words and phrases
5. Clear pronoun-antecedent references
6. Appropriate and logical organization
7. Closing by return.

1. A clear thesis statement

A clear thesis tells us what an essay is about. It usually contains key words or phrases that are repeated throughout the essay.

- “In this essay, I will discuss the social life of honeybees as a model for human society.”

Yawnsville. Sounds like something a third-grader would write. This thesis lacks specifics about how the essay will unfold. Readers want some clues in advance. Another problem is the word “I.” While some universities are now accepting the use of the FIRST-PERSON in essays, high schools generally do not. Therefore, until you are told otherwise, it would be best to avoid that form.

A better thesis statement would be like this:

- “Bees have complex social lives with work, communication, and even child-rearing practices that can serve as a model for human society.”

This thesis statement not only delivers more specifically the essay’s subject, but also it delineates the order in which each portion of the subject will be presented: first, work practices; second, communication practices; and last, child-rearing practices.

2. Repetition of key words and phrases

I know: I am repeating this idea from the explanation of the first item on our list, right? But, did you notice how that makes it easier to remember?

When we say that key words and phrases are repeated for coherence, there are a couple of points you must remember.

- a. The key words and phrases that are repeated should ideally appear in the thesis statement.
- b. Repeating key words and phrases does NOT give you license to have a repetitive and dull vocabulary.

One of the best tools a writer has is a rich and varied vocabulary. For example, “mad” could mean miffed, annoyed, furious, enraged, livid, and so forth. That’s an enormous range of emotions in one

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little word. Strike out mad, good, pretty and similar common words (including my latest pet peeve, "pumped" : L) and choose from the variety of more specific words instead.

3. Parallel structure aka parallelism

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Repeating grammatical structures makes the writing flow better. It has a rhythm that makes it pleasant to read and easier to understand. Parallel structure is especially useful when you have lists, such as lists of nouns, or even lists of verbs. Consider the following two sentences:

- "Floyd liked skiing, to yodel, and to play the xylophone." (not parallel)
- "Floyd liked skiing, yodeling and playing the xylophone." (parallel)

The first sentence doesn't sound right, does it? The second sentence is better because it uses parallel structure. For more information on parallel structure, consult your language arts handbook, or ask your teacher for help.

4. Transitional words and phrases

These words act like signs on a highway, and help the reader understand what lies ahead. For example:

- Words like "however" tell us that the next idea will be different from the first.
- Words like "also" tell us that more of the same ideas follow.
- Words like "next" help us to understand a sequence of ideas or events, such as one might find in a recipe.

Keep in mind that it is not limited to single words; phrases may also be transitional. What does the phrase "on the other hand" imply?

5. Clear pronoun-antecedent references

A noun is a person, place, thing, quality or idea. A pronoun is a substitute noun. The antecedent is the noun being replaced. For example, consider the following:

- "Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet, eating her curds and whey."

We may wonder what a tuffet is, and we may wonder why Miss M. is eating curds and whey, which sounds pretty gross, actually. But there is no question about WHOSE food she's snarfing down. The word "her" is a pronoun and it refers to the antecedent, "Little Miss Muffet."

When pronouns are not clear, we get into trouble. Consider the following:

- "The cop chased the robber down the alley. Suddenly, a shot rang out! He shot him." Well, who has been shot? THIS IS AN EXAMPLE OF POOR PRONOUN-ANTECEDENT REFERENCE. It is not that clear, is it? An exciting story is spoiled because of unclear pronoun-antecedent references.

6. Appropriate and logical organization

Writers must consider the appropriate organization for a piece of writing.

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There are **three chief methods of organization**:

- a. **Spatial – organization by space**, which is chiefly the format of **description**
- b. **Chronological – organization by time**, which is chiefly used in **narratives**, although it can be important in **process analysis pieces** as well (such as how to make a pizza)
- c. **Logical – this refers to a series of methods used for exposition, argumentation and persuasion**. Logical methods of development are subdivided further as follows:

Logical Organization subdivisions:	Comparison and contrast subdivisions:
i. Classification and division	Block Format: ✓ discusses item 1 and then item 2 <i>Example: all about a blue pen and then all about a yellow pencil</i> and
ii. Example and illustration	Side-by-Side Format: discusses both items together, characteristic by characteristic <i>Example: the blue pen marks are permanent, and the yellow pencil marks are temporary; the blue pen writes in blue ink and the yellow pencil writes in grey graphite, etc.</i>
iii. Process analysis	
iv. Cause and effect	
v. Definition	
vi. Comparison and contrast which is further subdivided into →	

7. Closing by return

Okay, so you won't know if this is a device used by the writer until you finish reading the essay, but by **closing a piece of writing with the same anecdote or idea or question posed in the introduction**, the writer helps drive home some serious points for us to ponder. (*Almost as efficient as honeybees, wouldn't you say?*)

The Five Types of Writing

Although not directly a part of coherence, let's quickly review this information.

Description – writing that describes and is usually arranged by space.

For example, first we describe the outside of the abandoned house. Then we go inside and describe the first floor. Next, we go upstairs, etc.

Narration – writing that tells a story and is usually arranged by time (also known as chronological order).

For example, first, Goldilocks breaks into the house. Then she eats the baby bear's breakfast and makes a nuisance of herself. Last, the bears exact a terrible revenge.

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Exposition – writing that explains, and has an objective tone with low or no emotion. It uses one of the methods of development found in Logical, noted in point 6 above.

For example, the causes of a war, or the effects of sun damage on skin.

Argument – writing that gives an opinion and nothing more. It has emotion and is more subjective than exposition. It uses the same methods of development as exposition.

For example, the definition of the perfect day starts with a huge breakfast in bed and a stack of murder mystery books. You can agree with me or not, but I am offering my opinion.

Persuasion – writing that gives an opinion AND has a call to action (asks you to vote, to sign a petition, to buy a product, etc.). It has much more emotion than argument, and is the most subjective of all the types of writing. Still, it relies of the same methods of development as Exposition and Argument.

For example, a comparison and contrast of Canadian universities with those in New Zealand might reveal my opinion that everyone must demand more funding for our universities. I am giving my opinion, but I also want you to do something, such as write your MP, call Open Line, start a petition, or vote a certain way.

By the way: the most common form of writing on the planet is persuasion. We call it advertising.

TWO FINAL POINTS WRITERS MUST ALWAYS KEEP IN MIND WHEN THEY WRITE:

1. Purpose	2. Audience
Why are they writing? What do they hope to achieve? Do they intend to entertain, to inform, to persuade, to illustrate, to change, to celebrate, to frighten, to educate, to improve, to liberate, to justify, to defend, to defeat, to lie ... or to make people just think “hmmmmmm”?	Whom are they addressing? What are the literacy skills of the readers? What values do the readers currently share? What is the audience’s SES (socio-economic status), gender, race, age, culture, nationality, religion or other factors?