

# Cohesion

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn what it means to have a cohesive essay and how cohesion can be achieved in your writing. Specifically, this lesson will focus on:

## 1. Cohesion in Writing

Many student writers have turned in papers only to have their instructors hand the papers back with comments that the writing doesn't "flow."

Unfortunately, instructors may not always be explicit about what this means—just that the essay doesn't "read" or "sound" right, or that the ideas don't progress from one to another.

By "flow," most readers mean what grammarians and linguists call **cohesion**, or the property of a text indicating its ability to hold itself together at the sentence and paragraph levels.

Cohesion has a very clear implication for your own written arguments: Just because an argument you're making is clear in your own head, that doesn't mean it's automatically clear to people who are reading the written version of your argument.

This is one of the reasons why it's a good idea to share your writing with others before you turn it in for a grade.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Cohesion

The property of a text indicating its ability to hold itself together at the sentence and paragraph levels.

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## 2. Strategies for Building Cohesion

As a writer, there are several techniques that you can use to create cohesion throughout your essay:

- Use of transitions
- Use of pronouns
- Use of repetition

## 2a. Use of Transitions

Many writers first learn to make their writing flow by using explicit, special-purpose transitional devices. You may hear these devices called “signposts” because they work much like highway and street signs.

Below is a list of all-purpose transition words and phrases, organized by their basic functions.

Function	Examples
To add or show sequence	again, also, and, and then, besides, equally important, finally, first, further, furthermore, in addition, in the first place, last, moreover, next, second, still, too
To compare	also, in the same way, likewise, similarly
To contrast	although, and yet, but, but at the same time, despite, even so, even though, for all that, however, in contrast, in spite of, nevertheless, notwithstanding, on the contrary, on the other hand, regardless, still, though, yet
To give examples or intensify	after all, an illustration of, even, for example, for instance, indeed, in fact, it is true, of course, specifically, that is, to illustrate, truly
To indicate place	above, adjacent to, below, elsewhere, farther on, here, near, nearby, on the other side, opposite to, there, to the east, to the left
To indicate time	after a while, afterward, as long as, as soon as, at last, at length, at that time, before, earlier, formerly, immediately, in the meantime, in the past, lately, later, meanwhile, now, presently, shortly, simultaneously, since, so far, soon, subsequently, then, thereafter, until, until now, when
To repeat, summarize, or conclude	all in all, altogether, in brief, in conclusion, in other words, in particular, in short, in simpler terms, in summary, on the whole, that is, to put it differently, to summarize
To show cause and effect	accordingly, as a result, because, consequently, for this purpose, hence, otherwise, since, then, therefore, thereupon, thus, to this end, with this object in mind



In many writing situations, you can expect your readers to pick up other useful clues for cohesion, so it's not necessary to use *a lot* of these “stock” or generic transition words. In fact, if you overuse them (for instance, if you start your first paragraph with “first,” your second paragraph with “second,” and so on), it can get annoying for your readers.

## 2b. Use of Pronouns

If you're old enough to vaguely remember the *Schoolhouse Rock* series, you might recall the episode about pronouns (e.g., “he,” “she,” “her,” “him,” “you,” “we,” “they,” “it,” “one,” “this,” “that,” etc.) and how they can stand in for nouns, even if the nouns have long names.

The idea is that pronouns make speaking and writing more efficient, but you may not have learned that pronouns are at least as powerful as cohesive devices. Since pronouns work by referring back to nouns that

have previously been mentioned, they can help writers carry the ideas their nouns represent across sentences and paragraphs.

You may have been told to limit your use of pronouns or even avoid them altogether. This is bad advice, but it's understandable: Pronouns work very well when they clearly refer to their antecedents (the nouns they are standing in for), but they can create significant comprehension problems, misdirection, and vagueness when they don't.

## 2c. Use of Repetition

Contrary to a lot of advice novice writers get, repetition is effective. It's a time-honored way to signal importance, create a sense of rhythm, and help audiences remember key ideas.

But repetition gets a bad reputation because it can become redundant. (Yes, that sentence used repetition to get its point across. It's no accident that it had a lot of "r"s.)

Repetition can involve individual words, phrases, or grammatical structures. When you repeat similar structural elements but not necessarily the words themselves, you are using **parallelism**, a special variety of repetition that not only helps cohesion but also helps you to communicate that similarly important ideas should be read together.

When sentences are written using non-parallel parts, it's certainly possible for readers to understand them, but it creates work for the reader that usually isn't necessary.

### IN CONTEXT

Compare these sentences:

*Student writers should learn to start projects early, how to ask for advice from teachers and peers, and when to focus on correcting grammar.*

*Student writers should learn to start projects early, to ask for advice from teachers and peers, and to determine when to focus on correcting their grammar.*

See the difference? The first sentence is comprehensible; the commas, for example, let you know that you're reading a list. But the extra adverbs ("how" and "when") get in the way of the sentence's clarity. And that problem, in turn, means that it's hard to see clearly how each item in the list relates to the others. In the revised sentence, though, it's a lot clearer that each of the three items is something student writers should "learn to" do. That relationship is made clear by the repeating grammatical pattern.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Parallelism

In writing, a grammar principle that involves repeating similar structural elements, but not necessarily the words themselves.

### 3. Cohesion in Practice

Here is an example of some writing that uses a variety of cohesion strategies. This short essay was written for a broad academic audience in a university publication and is about the current state of the English language.

#### Teaching (and Learning) Englishes

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I teach English-language writing, and I'm a native speaker of the English language. Being a native speaker might seem to be an excellent basic qualification for my job: At the very least, it should necessarily make me the model of English usage. However, it actually makes me very unusual.

According to The British Council, approximately 1.5 billion people around the world use English. Roughly 375 million of them are like me: They have learned English since birth, and most of them live in countries like the U.S., Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand that are traditional English-language centers.

That still leaves over a billion English users. 375 million of those people live in countries that were British colonies until the middle of the last century, such as Ghana, India, Kenya, and Nigeria.

But the largest number of English speakers—50% of the global total—are in countries that were not British colonies and don't have much of a history with English. Count China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, and South Korea among them. So, most English speakers aren't where we might expect them to be. In addition, they're not using English in ways we might expect, either, which helps explain why I'm referring to them as "users" and not "writers" or "speakers." Most people who use English around the world do so in specific circumstances in order to get very specific things done. Many Indians, for instance, might use English in publications and to transact business over the phone, Hindi in a government office, Gujarati at the store, and maybe one of several other languages at home.

What does this mean for my teaching and research? People and information move around globally more so now than ever and that movement makes diverse uses of English feed back into the U.S. As students at the U (and the U is not alone) become more culturally and linguistically diverse, I often have as much to learn from them as I have to teach them.

This short example uses each of the cohesion strategies described above:

1. The writer uses several stock transitions. In fact, one of them—"however"—helps introduce the surprising sentence at the end of the introduction by clearly signposting something different or unexpected. The fourth paragraph starts with "but," which signposts another transition to information that contradicts what comes before. (You may have been told never to start sentences with conjunctions like "but" or "and." It turns out that it's generally fine to do that. Just be aware of your readers' preferences.)

2. *Pronouns appear to be the most common cohesion device in the essay.* At the start of the third paragraph, for example, “that” stands in for the statistic in the previous paragraph, which would be hard to write out all over again. But “that” also carries forward the sense of the statistic into the next paragraph. And “those people” carries the statistic forward to the next sentence. (Really, “those” is an adjective that modifies “people,” but it’s enough like a pronoun that you can handle it like one here.)
3. *Repetition is also common in this essay.* Words are repeated—or at least, put very close to other words that are similar in meaning. “English” and “British colonies” clearly help tie together the third and fourth paragraphs. And sentences show parallelism. See, for instance, paragraph four: “So, most English speakers aren’t where we would expect them to be. In addition, they’re not using English in ways we might expect, either.”



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the importance of **cohesion in writing**. You then explored several **strategies for building cohesion**, including the **use of transitions**, the **use of pronouns**, and the **use of repetition**. Finally, you analyzed an example of **cohesion in practice**.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This content has been adapted from Lumen Learning's "Cohesion: What do People Mean When They Say My Writing Doesn't 'Flow'" tutorial.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Cohesion

The property of a text indicating its ability to hold itself together at the sentence and paragraph levels.

### Parallelism

In writing, a grammar principle that involves repeating similar structural elements, but not necessarily the words themselves.