

CORE LEARNING

COLLEGE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY &
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Writing Right

Introduction to Academic Writing: A Stitch in Time: Achieving Flow Across an Essay

03

**Introduction
Learning Outcomes**

04 - 06

Analysing and evaluating different paragraphs which have varying levels of clarity

07

Editing a paragraph to refine or remove sentences and achieve greater coherence

08

Analysing the connection between different paragraphs and identifying ways to achieve better flow between them

09

Using writing checklists to reflect on and edit one's own essay after it is completed

10 - 12

Exercises

*A composition is an arrangement, built out of parts, that aims at
seamlessness.*
– Eric Maisel

When musical notes combine to form a melody, it goes beyond mere sounds. If the melody is well-arranged, it becomes music to our ears. The arrangement of sounds, words, colours, and even objects can make the difference between a sense of order and disorder. In a good essay, there is a sense of flow in the arguments that the author makes. While there are different parts and perspectives, they are coherent, seamless, and serve an overarching purpose.

In the previous writing series 3 & 4, we covered the anatomy of a paragraph and learnt how to structure each paragraph well. In this section, we will explore ways to arrange paragraphs coherently across the whole essay so that the ideas flow and transition smoothly.

A Stitch in Time: Achieving Flow Across an Essay

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Organise all the sentences within a paragraph coherently so that it supports the topic sentence and thesis
 - Organise all the paragraphs across the essay so that it supports the overall thesis
 - Analyse and evaluate the essay after it is completed to check for overall coherence
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Analysing and evaluating different paragraphs which have varying levels of clarity

A well-organised paragraph has a clear topic sentence. This sentence provides the reader with a good idea about the key message in the paragraph. Depending on the purpose of the paragraph, the author may choose to support an idea with specific evidence or give reasons to debunk it. Regardless, a clear topic sentence at the start of the paragraph makes it easier for the reader to follow the argument

Example 1

*The days of unclean streets with hawkers plying their trade by the roadside are gone. Food and hygiene standards have led to numerous changes in terms of hawker food in Chinatown. After many decades, Singapore's Chinatown has undergone many changes, but some aspects should be preserved. The older generation of hawkers can pass on their skills to the younger generation of hawkers through apprenticeships or sponsored events. There are still unique elements which can be preserved in practical ways for the current generation. However, we can find ways to continue to pass down the unique food recipes and methods of preparation.*¹

In this paragraph, the topic sentence suggests that the key idea centres on hygiene and hawkers selling food by the roadside. However, the subsequent sentences do not support this idea and veers into suggesting how the older generation of hawkers can preserve their food heritage. In short, the paragraph is not well organised and clear. To revise the paragraph, we can ask ourselves some key questions before rewriting and organising the sentences.

¹ Adapted from an unpublished manuscript by Ong, Y.C.M. (2002). *Recreating Chinatown*. [Unpublished manuscript] NIE,NTU: Singapore.

Key questions to ask	Reasoning	Suggested revision
<p>What is the main point of the paragraph?</p> <p>Does the topic sentence provide an idea about what the paragraph is about?</p>	<p>The key idea in this paragraph is about change and continuity.</p>	<p>After many decades, Singapore's Chinatown has undergone many changes, but some aspects should be preserved.</p>
<p>What kind of evidence will we use to support the topic sentence?</p>	<p>Evidence to illustrate the changes. It should be relevant to the topic sentence.</p>	<p>The days of unclean streets with hawkers plying their trade by the roadside are gone.</p>
<p>Is the evidence relevant to the topic sentence?</p>	<p>Evidence to illustrate continuity. It should be relevant to the topic sentence.</p>	<p>However, there are still unique elements which can be preserved in practical ways for the current generation. This can be done by connecting the older generation of hawkers to the younger generations through apprenticeships or sponsored events.</p>
<p>Does the concluding sentence relate to the main argument in the paragraph?</p>	<p>The concluding sentence recaps the main idea of the paragraph and relates to the topic sentence.</p>	<p>Food and hygiene standards have led to numerous changes in terms of hawker food in Chinatown. However, we can find ways to continue to pass down the unique food recipes and methods of preparation.</p>

Example 2

Instead of re-creating Chinatown, could one use technology to show audio-visual material from the past? Technology holds great potential to unlocking the door of the past. This suggestion saves a great amount of land, something that is invaluable in Singapore. However, technology can also lead to a cold and distant atmosphere. The essence of experiencing the old Chinatown would be lost. Adding to that cold and distant atmosphere would be the artificiality of the place.²

² Adapted from an unpublished manuscript by Ong, Y.C.M. (2002). *Recreating Chinatown*. [Unpublished manuscript] NIE, NTU: Singapore.

Key questions to ask	Reasoning	Suggested revision
<p>What is the main point of the paragraph?</p> <p>Does the topic sentence provide an idea about what the paragraph is about?</p>	<p>The key idea in this paragraph is about using technology to re-create scenes from the past.</p>	<p>Technology can re-create scenes from the past using audio-visual material, but it is not without challenges.</p> <p><i>Note: Rhetorical questions tend to add to the informality of the writing and are generally not recommended for academic papers. In this case, it is better to provide a clear topic sentence to guide the reader through the paragraph. An example is provided in the revised topic sentence above.</i></p>
<p>What kind of evidence will we use to support the topic sentence?</p> <p>Is the evidence relevant to the topic sentence?</p>	<p>Evidence to elaborate on the topic sentence by providing both the benefit and cost of using technology.</p>	<p>While it saves valuable land space, the smells, sounds, and sights cannot be easily replicated using technology.</p>
<p>Does the concluding sentence relate to the main argument in the paragraph?</p>	<p>A concluding sentence to relate to the main point of the paragraph and reiterate the challenge of re-creating scenes from the past.</p>	<p>This leads to the re-created scenes from the past looking artificial and the viewers feeling cold and distant.</p>

Editing a paragraph to refine or remove sentences and achieve greater coherence

Never use two words when one will do.
- Thomas Jefferson

It is a misconception that more words can make a paragraph or essay better. Wordiness can distract and confuse readers so it would be best to practice the 3Cs to keep our sentences and paragraphs *clear, concise, and coherent*.

In the previous example, the sentences were rearranged to achieve greater flow and coherence. In this example, we explore how we can refine sentences by removing and revising some phrases.

Original sentences	Revised sentences
However, there are still unique elements which can be preserved in practical ways for the current generation. This can be done by connecting the older generation of hawkers to the younger generations through apprenticeships or sponsored events.	However, there are unique elements which can be preserved in practical ways. <i>The word 'still' is redundant and removed. There is no need to mention 'for the current generation' as it is understood who it is meant for.</i> The older generation of hawkers can be connected to the younger generations through apprenticeships or sponsored events. <i>Here, for brevity, we omit 'This can be done...'</i>
Food and hygiene standards have led to numerous changes in terms of hawker food in Chinatown. However, we can find ways to continue to pass down the unique food recipes and methods of preparation.	While food and hygiene standards have led to positive changes, we can find ways to continue to pass down the unique food recipes and methods of preparation. <i>Instead of using two sentences, we can synthesise the ideas into one concluding sentence which is shorter.</i>

Analysing the connection between different paragraphs and identifying ways to achieve better flow across them

While it is good to have concise and well-organised paragraphs, the essay involves us linking these paragraphs together to support the overall thesis of the essay. In guiding the reader across different ideas, the writer may use transitional words or phrases in the topic or concluding statements. This helps the reader to follow the ideas from one to the other.

The table below shows some examples of these transitional words and how they can be used.

Category	Transition words or phrases	Examples
Causation (Showing cause and effect)	Therefore, thus, hence, consequently, as a result	As a result of the increase in rent, many hawkers had to move elsewhere. They were unable to get any funding. Therefore , they had to close the shop.
Lists (Showing and connecting different events)	Firstly, secondly, lastly, finally, besides, additionally	Firstly , it costs too much. Secondly , we don't have enough manpower. Finally , we don't think it's worthwhile anymore.
Contrast (To show the difference between two things)	Nevertheless, on the contrary, despite, on the other hand, yet, however	He was a world-class chef. Nevertheless , he struggled to manage the restaurant. It has been very difficult for businesses during the pandemic. There are, however , some enterprising companies that have succeeded in transforming their operations.
Similarity	In the same way, likewise,	The customers were struggling with the increase in prices. In the same way , many business owners complained that the cost of goods was increasing too quickly.
Conclusion	To conclude, finally, in the end	To conclude , we believe that climate change is the key issue of our times.
Summary	In summary, in short, to sum up	In summary , we must use less plastics to save the planet.

Note: In some cases, if we remove the transitional words in bold, the order of the sentences will still be logical. The purpose, however, is to make it the flow of the argument clearer for the reader.

Using writing checklists to reflect on and edit one's own essay after it is completed

After an essay is completed, there are two important processes to consider. The first is editing and the second is revising the essay. Both can be tedious and seemingly mundane. However, they are equally important if one is keen to improve on the first draft. One way to do this is to use checklists.

Even experts need checklists. In his riveting book, *The Checklist Manifesto*, Gawande (2010) explores how surgeons, pilots, and professional builders need and use checklists. There are numerous good reasons highlighted, but one recurrent and crucial one is that people often do not make use of the knowledge that they know. In a routine surgery or flight, given the complexity of the process, it is easy to miss a simple but crucial step. Writing is also a very complex activity, even though it may not involve life or death, and it can be easy to ignore some simple yet important points to effectively edit or revise an essay.

Here are two simple checklists that can be used for editing and revising one's essay. In an editing checklist, it is focused on the final product. If you are wearing the hat of the editor, you are looking for errors and correcting them. You are ensuring that the essay meets all the requirements. However, in a revising checklist, you are asking questions and clarifying ideas as opposed to correcting the mechanics of the writing. As such, this may result in you revising, shifting, or even removing certain paragraphs within the essay.

Editing checklist		✓
1	I have checked and followed all the guidelines required for this essay assignment.	
2	I have read the essay to correct all the spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors.	
3	I have used a 'spell check' function to look for other possible errors.	
4	I have checked the language to ensure that it is direct and clear.	
5	I have checked my tenses to ensure that they are correct.	
6	I have referenced all the information sources in my essay.	
7	I have checked that the references are all accurate.	

Revising checklist		✓
1	I have a clear thesis. It is stated clearly in my introduction.	
2	My introduction provides a good overview of my essay and argument.	
3	My paragraphs begin with a topic sentence.	
4	The sentences within the paragraph flow smoothly.	
5	The paragraphs are linked such that the argument moves in a logical order.	
6	The paragraphs are all linked to the overall thesis and have a clear purpose.	
7	The essay has a clear conclusion that reiterates my central thesis.	

Topic Review and Exercises

Analysing sample questions and editing them to achieve greater coherence

After analysing the sentences in the table, which make up a paragraph, rearrange the sentences to achieve greater coherence and flow. You may list the order of the sentences in the column on the right before checking your answers.

Exercise 1

No.	Sample sentences to be rearranged	Your suggested order of sentences
1	People can be motivated extrinsically by rewards and incentives in the short term.	<i>E.g. 1</i>
2	Moreover, people who have a clear idea of their goals lead more purposeful lives as they are more motivated to achieve their goals.	
3	In short, while rewards and incentives may motivate people extrinsically, goals may provide greater purpose and sustain the levels of motivation for longer periods of time.	
4	However, the motivational strength of incentives is not as strong as the drive to achieve goals.	
5	Incentives provide external meaning and purpose to an individual.	

Suggested response to Exercise 1

1	People can be motivated extrinsically by rewards and incentives in the short term.	<i>Topic sentence</i>
5	Incentives provide external meaning and purpose to an individual.	<i>Elaboration on topic sentence</i>
4	However, the motivational strength of incentives is not as strong as the drive to achieve goals.	<i>Contrasting the extrinsic rewards with an intrinsic drive to achieve goals</i>
2	Moreover, people who have a clear idea of their goals lead more purposeful lives as they are more motivated to achieve their goals.	<i>Another supporting point for intrinsic drive provided here</i>
3	In short, while rewards and incentives may motivate people extrinsically, goals may provide greater purpose and sustain the levels of motivation for longer periods of time.	<i>Concluding sentence to wrap up the paragraph</i>

Evaluating short paragraphs using writing checklists

Exercise 2

Read the following paragraphs and use the ‘Revising checklist’ to analyse if the points have been included. Provide evidence for your responses using the sentence numbers indicated in brackets. For the purpose of this exercise, only the introduction and conclusion are given there.

Introduction

Without the successful transfer of learning, the concepts learnt in class are redundant and eventually forgotten [1]. This essay discusses the use of an educational virtual world ‘Whyville’ and analyses how its key features promote the transfer of learning [2]. It proposes a framework that can be used to design for transfer in such virtual worlds and thus increase the likelihood of users transferring their learning [3]. The three central features of this framework are Conceptualization for transfer, Creating for transfer, and Collaboration for transfer [4]. Each feature is discussed in the subsequent sections, which includes an analysis of the costs and benefits [5].

Conclusion

Virtual worlds have much educational potential for teaching and learning [6]. However, carelessly immersing students in a virtual world will not result in them learning automatically [7]. This essay has shown and discussed a framework for thinking about how to design for transfer [8]. It highlighted three key features which can nurture students’ transfer of learning effectively [9]. By having more of these features purposefully integrated within the virtual world and the learning tasks, students can build on their initial learning and increase their chances of using it in the future [10].³

No.	Revising checklist	✓	Provide evidence using the sentence numbers
1	I have a clear thesis. It is stated clearly in my introduction.		
2	My introduction provides a good overview of my essay and argument.		
3	The essay has a clear conclusion that reiterates my central thesis.		

³ Adapted from an unpublished manuscript by Ong, Y.C.M. (2012). *Designing for transfer: Exploring how features in educational virtual worlds can facilitate better application of learning.* [Unpublished manuscript] Harvard University, USA.

Suggested response for Exercise 2

No.	Revising checklist	✓	Provide evidence using the sentence number
1	I have a clear thesis. It is stated clearly in my introduction.		2, 3
2	My introduction provides a good overview of my essay and argument.		4, 5
3	The essay has a clear conclusion that reiterates my central thesis.		8, 9, 10

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