

THE "WRITE" STUFF

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CONSTRUCTING TRANSITIONS

WHAT IS A TRANSITION?

"Transitions" in your writing work like on-ramps and off-ramps on highways: they make it possible for readers to "get on" and "get off" of your main ideas smoothly. Most of these "ramps" are short—only a word or phrase—but they can be a sentence or even a whole paragraph.

Paradoxically, the most effective transitions are the ones that aren't obvious to readers. Transitions aren't meant to draw attention to themselves, but simply to facilitate or "ease" the reading process. Make no mistake: although they're usually not very noticeable, they are very important.

TRANSITION WORDS

What a difference a word makes! Consider the following pair of sentences: "I believe in eating healthfully. I eat a little chocolate every day." Are you confused? I expect so. I seem to be implying that eating chocolate every day is important to eating healthfully.

Read the sentences again: "I believe in eating healthfully; **however**, I eat a little chocolate every day." Aha! The transition "even so" clarifies my meaning: I want to eat healthfully; I recognize that chocolate is not a healthy food; yet, I eat a little anyway. (If you've concluded that I'm a "chocoholic," you're right.)

Here are some commonly-used transition words:

to introduce an item in a series: *first, second; for one thing, for another; furthermore; in addition; also; finally.*

to introduce an example: *for example; for instance; in particular; specifically; that is; namely.*

to introduce a result or cause: *consequently; as a result; therefore; so; then; because; since; for.*

to introduce a conclusion or summary: *in conclusion; finally; all in all; evidently; clearly; actually; altogether; of course; to sum up.*

to introduce an opposing point of view: *but; however; even so; nevertheless; on the contrary; on the other hand; in contrast; still; neither . . . nor.*

to introduce a restatement or clarification: *that is; in other words; to put it another way.*

Consider posting this list next to your computer to remind yourself to use transitions every time you write, and add to it as you discover new ones. In fact, the words themselves—like "for example," "on the other hand," and "therefore"—will probably give you ideas to write about if you get stuck.

TRANSITION SENTENCES

A previous edition of *The Write Stuff*, titled "Constructing Paragraphs," emphasized the importance of topic sentences in effective paragraphs. A topic sentence serves as the "backbone" of a paragraph: it announces the main idea that you develop in the sentences that follow. Topic sentences can also provide "transitions" between paragraphs.

When a topic sentence provides a transition between paragraphs, the first half of the topic sentence usually sums up what came "before" and the second half suggests what will come "after." Here's an example: "However, Melinda did not let her learning disability keep her from graduation from college." What came "before" this sentence? Probably a discussion about Melinda's learning disability. What will come "after"? Probably a description of the strategies Melinda used to cope with her disability. Try this one: "As a result of these labor strikes, Congress passed legislation to protect workers' rights." What do you think came "before" and will come "after" this sentence?

Use transition words and phrases in your topic sentences. Use them within paragraphs, also, to move from one sentence to another. In fact, use them wherever you can. It's hard to "overdo" transitions.

FANCY TRANSITIONS

Repeating words and phrases, repeating sentence structure, and using "collocation" are three more ways you can create transitions with pizzazz.

Writers usually try to avoid repeating words and phrases—unintended repetition can create dull writing. However, intentional repetition is altogether different. For example, in the last paragraph of the previous section, "Transition Sentences," I repeat the word "use" three times, on purpose. Can you guess why? For one, I want to make sure you "hear" my message. (Intentional repetition reinforces ideas.) For another, repeating "use" demonstrates what all three sentences have in common—they all advocate using transition words.

I also repeat "sentence structure" in that paragraph: "Use transition words . . . Use them . . . Use them. . ." (The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. used repetitious sentence structure *masterfully*, most famously in his "I have a dream . . ." speech.) Once again, repetition reinforces ideas. In addition, repeating sentence structure creates a "rhythm" that will stay with your readers.

Finally, a "collocation" is a grouping of words or images. Let's say that you are writing on the growing tensions between blacks and whites in the 1950's. You might create a "collocation" of fire imagery in your piece, with words like these: "smoldering," "heating up," "stoking the flames," etc. These words would help reinforce your thesis—tensions were growing like a slow-burning fire—and tie in your secondary points. Collocation can also create images in your readers' minds that will stay with them and, therefore, help them remember your points.