# Coherence: Two Strategies

**Topic chain**

In its simplest form, the topic chain is just repetition of the same topic through the paragraph. The topic announced by each sentence -- the subject coming at the beginning of the sentence -- remains consistent through the paragraph. The following paragraph illustrates what happens when the topic chain is not observed. It is taken from David Herbert Donald's biography, Lincoln, but it has been doctored to interfere with the coherence of the original.

[1] Returning to Indiana, Lincoln dutifully handed over his earnings to his father, but he began to spend more and more time away from home. [2] The village of Gentryville lay about a mile and a half away, and he liked to go there and occasionally help out at James Gentry's store or work with John Baldwin, the local blacksmith. [3] All the young men who were about to come of age and were restless in the narrow society of southern Indiana gathered about him, because he was always full of talk and plans and jokes and tricks.

This is a fairly simple paragraph. Even in its doctored state it isn't hard to read. But it's harder to read than it should be. Notice how the beginning of each sentence pulls the reader's attention off to a different topic: "Lincoln handed over his earnings," "The village of Gentryville," "All the young men." The reader has to wait to find out what sentences 2 and 3 have to do with the theme of Lincoln's restlessness, the theme being set up in sentence 1.

The paragraph is easy to remedy, because it is constructed in such a way that both sentences 2 and 3 refer directly back to sentence 1, exemplifying and clarifying it. And with a little rearranging, young Abe Lincoln becomes the topic of all three sentences. Here is the paragraph as Donald actually wrote it.

[1] Returning to Indiana, Lincoln dutifully handed over his earnings to his father, but he began to spend more and more time away from home. [2] He liked to go to the village of Gentryville, about a mile and a half away, where he occasionally helped out at James Gentry's store, and he worked sometimes with John Baldwin, the local blacksmith. [3] As always, he was full of talk and plans and jokes and tricks, and he gathered about him all the young men who were about to come of age and were restless in the narrow society of southern Indiana. (p. 35\*)

The Lincoln paragraph illustrates a simple way to achieve coherence by means of the topic chain. Let's move on to a more complex example, one in which not every paragraph can begin with the same subject. The topic of each sentence in the first, non-coherent example, is italicized to highlight the confusing way it switches the reader's attention to different topics. (Thanks to our friends at the BYU Writing Center for this example.)

[1] *Particular ideas toward the beginning of each clause* focus the reader's attention, so topics are crucial. [2] Cumulatively, *the thematic signposts that are provided by these ideas* should focus the reader's attention toward a well-defined set of connected ideas. [3] *Moving through a paragraph from a cumulatively coherent point of view* is made possible by a sequence of topics that seem to constitute a coherent sequence of connected ideas. [4] *A lack of context for each sentence* is one consequence of making the reader begin sentences with random shifts in topics. [5] *Feelings of dislocation, disorientation, and lack of focus* will occur in the reader when that happens. [6] *The rest of the sentence as well as whole paragraphs* will be affected by a reader's point of view as a result of topic announcement.

The paragraph seems to jump around. Rewritten to observe the topic chain, the paragraph looks like this:

[1] *Topics* are crucial because *they* focus a reader's attention on a particular idea toward the beginning of each clause. [2] Cumulatively, *these ideas* provide thematic signposts that should focus your reader's attention on a well-defined set of connected ideas. [3] If *a sequence of topics* seems coherent, *that sequence* will move your reader through a paragraph from a cumulatively coherent point of view. [4] But if *your topics* shift randomly, then *your reader* has to begin each sentence out of context, from no coherent point of view. [5] When *that* happens, *your reader* will feel dislocated, disoriented, out of focus. [6] *You* must provide your readers with a coherent point of view, with a logical continuity that will guide them not only through individual sentences but through whole paragraphs.

The italicized words, once again, signal the sentence topics. In this example, sentence 2 begins with a different subject than sentence 1, but the phrase these ideas maintains a clear link with the previous sentence. Sentence 3 begins with a third new subject, *sequence*, but the phrase *sequence of topics* links it back to sentence 1. And so on through the paragraph.

**The known-new contract**

The preceding example is coherent also because it observes the known-new contract. The known-new contract establishes a simple principle: readers read more easily if each sentence starts with what they already know and proceeds on to what they don't know. This is a pretty obvious psychological fact; when we learn something new, we have an easier job of it if we can relate it to something we already know. The italicized words in the rewritten paragraph are all known information, so each sentence proceeds from known to new.

If you can stand another example, let's look at a still more complex one, again from Donald's biography of Lincoln. As before, it has been doctored to interfere with the coherence of the original. It concerns Lincoln's highly controversial move to suspend the writ of habeas corpus during the Civil War.

[1] Greater infringements on individual liberties than in any other period in American history would occur during the next years. [2] In localities where secession seemed dangerous, the writ of habeas corpus was repeatedly suspended. [3] Throughout the country on September 24, 1862, and again on September 15, 1863, Lincoln suspended the privilege of the writ. [4] The Secretary of State was initially given control of the arbitrary arrests of civilians, and by the best count, 864 persons were imprisoned and held without trial in the first nine months of the war. [5] The number of cases greatly increased after February 1862, when such arrests became the province of the Secretary of War. [6] Spies, smugglers, blockade-runners, carriers of contraband goods, and foreign nationals comprised most of the persons so arrested; only a few were truly political prisoners, jailed for expressing their beliefs. [7] That devotion to civil liberties was not the primary concern of Lincoln's administration was clear from Lincoln's first message to Congress.

One Writing Center consultant, upon reading this paragraph, noted that it looked like much of the academic writing she has to wade through all the time. Sentences 4 and 6 are perhaps the most glaring examples of the violation of the known-new contract. In sentence 4, "the Secretary of State" is new information. It seems to come out of nowhere, with no connection with what came before. In sentence 6, "Spies, smugglers," etc., seems like an even more sudden jump. The known information that would provide a clear connection -- "most of the persons so arrested" -- comes after the new. The reader experiences what seems like a jarring change of topic and has to read on into the middle of the sentence to make sure this sentence is really on the same topic as the previous one.

The last sentence presents another difficulty. Not only does it begin with new information, but it makes the reader stop and figure out its structure. Is "That devotion to civil liberties" the subject? It seems so at first. But wait, read on and you find that it's not just a noun phrase being used as the subject of the sentence, it's a whole clause. The entire clause, "That devotion to civil liberties was not the primary concern of Lincoln's administration," is the subject. As we read the sentence, we intuitively look for structural clues to tell us how to read it. This sentence gives a false clue about its structure, so the reader has to go back and start the sentence over.

Here is the paragraph as Donald actually wrote it.

[1] The next years would see greater infringements on individual liberties than in any other period in American history. [2] Repeatedly the writ of habeas corpus was suspended in localities where secession seemed dangerous, [3] and on September 24, 1862, and again on September 15, 1863, Lincoln suspended the privilege of the writ throughout the country. [4] Initially control of the arbitrary arrests of civilians was given to the Secretary of State, and by the best count, 864 persons were imprisoned and held without trial in the first nine months of the war. [5] After February 1862, when such arrests became the province of the Secretary of War, the number of cases greatly increased. [6] Most of the persons so arrested were spies, smugglers, blockade-runners, carriers of contraband goods, and foreign nationals; only a few were truly political prisoners, jailed for expressing their beliefs. [7] It was nevertheless clear from Lincoln's first message to Congress that devotion to civil liberties was not the primary concern of his administration. (p. 304)

Donald's published paragraph is easier to read than the doctored version that preceded it. The known-new contract isn't as easy to see as in the previous pair of paragraphs, but it's at work nevertheless. Some of the known information, as in sentences 1 and 2, is carried over from previous paragraphs. Much of it is implied, as in 4, 6, and 7. In 4, Donald is counting on the reader's being able to move with him from the suspending of the writ to the matter of who would control the ensuing arrests. (Some readers might prefer a more explicit known-new link at this point.) In 6, "the persons so arrested" is linked to "arrests" and "number of cases" in the previous sentence.

Known information is also found in the thread of dates running through the paragraph, in sentences 1, 3, and 5. The paragraph exhibits a further form of the known-new contract in the "glue" supplied by repetition of key words: *writ, suspended, arrests/arrested,* and particularly *liberties* in the first and last sentences.

The topic chain and the known-new contract are two of three main devices through which a writer achieves coherence. The third big one is parallelism.

\*David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln*. New York: Touchstone, 1995.

*Word Works: Learning through Writing at Boise State University*. Number 97 March 1999. Published by the BSU Writing Center.