Bigger is Harder!

A well-written dissertation is essentially a sustained analysis of a research topic…. The primary problems that PhD students encounter when writing a dissertation are related to the matters of clarity and organization. In an analysis of this length and breadth, it is easy to lose focus and direction.

Clarity for the Reader

- Organizational patterns operate only to facilitate communication.
- Particular organizational patterns are affected by the nature of your study, your disciplinary field, and department and committee requirements.

Organizing from Big to Little

- Organization of the Conventional Dissertation
- Chapter-by-Chapter Organization Patterns
- Coherence within the Chapters
Chapter 1: Introduction and Problem Statement

1. Your problem within the context of the broader educational or social universe.
2. “Joining the conversation.”

Chapter 2: Literature Review

- Chapter 2: Part to Whole Analysis

Chapter 2: Part-to-Whole Analysis
Chapter 3: Methodology (Process Analysis)

- Process maps show the sequence of a series of activities, where each activity is transforming something along the way to the process’s targeted outcome.

Chapter 4: Results and/or Findings

- Multiple organizational shapes within this chapter
  - Part to whole analysis
  - Cause and effect
  - Definition
  - Comparison/contrast

Chunking with Says and Does

- Use “Says and Does” to check if each chunk of your chapter is doing what you want it to!
- Rhetorical possibilities:
  - Introduce an idea
  - State a position or claim
  - Cite prior authorities
  - Summarize research
  - Provide background information or context

Chunking with Says and Does

- Rhetorical possibilities:
  - Present a literature survey
  - Present methodology
  - Present examples and/or evidence
  - Analyze examples and/or evidence
    - Process
    - Cause and effect
    - Comparison/contrast
  - Exemplification/part to whole
  - Define a problem/present a solution
  - Define terminology

Coherence

- Coherence literally means “sticking together.” When writing is coherent, the words and the information they convey are related to one another so that readers can follow the flow of thought easily from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph. Coherence in writing actually has a dynamic quality, because it has to do with movement: movement of information and ideas, movement of the reader’s changing perceptions and knowledge.
- Two aspects of coherence to consider are the topic chain and the known-new contract. Between them they encompass a good deal of the writing strategies that make up coherence.
Topic Chain

- The topic chain is the 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.

Known-New

- 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.

Transitions

- Any verbal strategy that helps readers make connections.
  - Counting words: first, second, next, finally
  - Expressions that show relationships of ideas: on the other hand, however, as a result, furthermore, etc.
  - Repeating a key word: “Middle school students seem to ask more questions than high school students. These middle school students, according to Meiser (1993) seem less inhibited in their questioning behavior.”

Repetition of Key Words

- Repeating key words in a paragraph is an important technique for achieving coherence. Used skillfully and selectively, as in the following paragraph, this technique can help to hold sentences together and focus the reader’s attention on a central idea.

Repetition of Key Words

- We Americans are a charitable and humane people: we have institutions devoted to every good cause from rescuing homeless cats to preventing World War III. But what have we done to promote the art of thinking? Certainly we make no room for thought in our daily lives. Suppose a man were to say to his friends, “I’m not going to PTA tonight (or choir practice or the baseball game) because I need some time to myself, some time to think”? Such a man would be shunned by his neighbors; his family would be ashamed of him. What if a teenager were to say, “I’m not going to the dance tonight because I need some time to think”? His parents would immediately start looking in the Yellow Pages for a psychiatrist. We are all too much like Julius Caesar: we fear and distrust people who think too much. We believe that almost anything is more important than thinking.
  - (Carolyn Kane, from “Thinking: A Neglected Art,” in Newsweek, 14 December 1981)

Repetition of Key Words and Sentence Structures

- A similar way to achieve coherence in our writing is to repeat a particular sentence structure along with a key word or phrase. Although we usually try to vary the length and shape of our sentences, now and then we may choose to repeat a construction to emphasize connections between related ideas.

  - Example of structural repetition from the play Getting Married, by George Bernard Shaw:

  “There are couples who dislike one another furiously for several hours at a time; there are couples who dislike one another permanently; and there are couples who never dislike one another; but these last are people who are incapable of disliking anybody.”

  - Notice how Shaw’s reliance on semicolons (rather than periods) reinforces the sense of unity and coherence in this passage.
Subordination and Coordination

- All sentences are, of course, subordinate to the topic sentence. Subordination shows how some thoughts are secondary to others while coordination shows how thoughts are equal. The balancing of ideas in a varied, rhythmic pattern provides a smooth flow from sentence to sentence within a paragraph.

Subordination and Coordination

- Without careful subordination and coordination, the paragraph sometimes dwindles to a list of simple sentences or a series of compounds bumping one into the next. These few sentences illustrate the jagged effect of that unrelieved sentence pattern:
  
  Amtrak is a huge train system. It is languishing. It is large. Perhaps it is as large as some of the great systems in the history of rail passenger service. The company is floundering.

Subordination and Coordination

- Varied coordination and subordination would help that passage read more smoothly:
  
  Amtrak is a huge but languishing train system. It is large, perhaps as large as some of the great systems in the history of rail passenger service, but despite its scope, the company is floundering.

Some Advice

- Consistent Definitions and Terminology: A good dissertation defines important concepts clearly and concisely and uses the same terminology and its attendant definitions consistently throughout the entire dissertation.

Just Keep Doing It!

Keep right on to the end of the road.

-- Harry Lauder