

Cohesive writing

4. Paragraph development: maintaining the focus

Paragraphs¹

A paragraph is a related group of sentences which develops one main idea. This idea is generally expressed in one sentence known as the 'topic sentence'. The topic sentence usually occurs as the first sentence in the paragraph; however, it can occur in the middle of a paragraph or even at the end. In addition to the topic sentence, a paragraph contains other sentences supporting the topic sentence. A paragraph may also contain a concluding sentence, or sentences which provide a transition to the following paragraph. For example:



1. Conjunction: linking words



2. Reference: tracing threads



3. Lexical cohesion: words that go together



4. Paragraph development

<p>According to the reports of Captain James Cook and Sir Joseph Banks, Botany Bay offered many advantages. These included a coastal area with a sheltered port, friendly natives, a pleasant climate, fertile soil, food sources including wild fruits, vegetables, birds and fish, and an environment in which the convicts could be self sufficient in a year. It was also attractive due to its great distance from Britain and the fact that the convicts would have no means of escape. In addition, it offered two significant advantages: it was a strategic stronghold in the East and it promised to be an important naval store of flax, hemp and timber.</p>	<p><i>topic sentence</i></p> <p><i>supporting information (lists the advantages)</i></p> <p><i>The final sentence also functions as a transition to the next paragraph about the importance of finding naval supplies.</i></p>
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Topic sentences occur mostly at the beginning of a paragraph, and as you can see in the example, the topic sentence signals to the reader what the rest of the paragraph is about. Without topic sentences, paragraphs can be difficult to read as well as difficult to write. Formulating a clear topic sentence will help you to establish the information that should be included in your paragraph.

Here is another example of a paragraph with a topic sentence, but this time from a law essay.

<p><i>(end of previous paragraph)</i> In terms of money or property claims, contingency fees encompass an important attribute of access to justice for all sections of the community.</p> <p>It is evident that the court system will not always ensure justice in our legal system. With funding and delay restrictions on courts, access to justice can be initiated through various other methods. Gaining more popularity and acceptance most recently is alternative dispute resolution (ADR) where the parties to a dispute attempt to resolve their differences themselves with the aid of a third party. The parties</p>	<p><i>transition from previous paragraph topic sentence</i></p> <p><i>supporting information (one example of another method of access to justice)</i></p>
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Learning objectives

This module will help you to:

- understand the concept of cohesive writing
- be familiar with the main language tools which create cohesion in writing. These are:
 - conjunction (*and, but, etc.*)
 - reference (*the people – they, etc.*)
 - lexical cohesion (*words that go together*)
 - paragraph development
- use these tools to create writing that flows and guides the reader



aim towards a “consensual settlement” (Sackville, 1995, p.215) typically through mediation. ADR holds advantages over litigation in the reduction of court delays and the costs to parties, and the potential for hostilities to be extinguished. Through these elements, ADR has brought about much progress in access to justice, evidenced by its incorporation into Federal Court, Family Court and Administrative Appeals Tribunal proceedings. (AJAC, 1994, p.xxxix).

Task 4.1 Identifying topic sentences and supporting information

The following paragraphs are from a first year accounting and finance essay.² Identify the topic sentence and the supporting information in each paragraph.

Paragraphs from an accounting and finance essay

<p>There are a number of users of accounting information who require less detailed reports than those mentioned above, but who still have valid reason to request such information. Employees and their Trade Unions are interested in the financial success and stability of the business as it indicates the scope for possible wage and fringe benefit increases (Barton 1989, p.32). Customers often insist on having a copy of the contractor’s statement of financial position. Competitors of public companies are always interested in the operating results and financial positions of their rivals, and suppliers are concerned with the company’s ability to pay for any goods supplied on credit.</p> <p>As well as the questions of who financial information should be directed at and what those groups require that information for, there are other questions that should be considered. For example, should customer satisfaction be given a value and incorporated into financial reports? Sales revenue can be very large in one period, and considerably smaller in the next if dissatisfied customers return items purchased earlier. (Barret, Verastergui, 1985, p.261). Another obscure factor is whether or not changing price levels should be reflected in adjustments to financial statements. By considering the two main questions proposed previously, “who requires the information” and “for what reason”, answers to these questions may be found; however, they are still surrounded by an air of ambiguity.</p>	<p>ARGUMENT topic sentence</p> <hr/> <p>supporting information</p> <p>1.....</p> <p>2.....</p> <p>3.....</p> <p>4.....</p>
	<p>ARGUMENT topic sentence</p> <hr/> <p>supporting information (elaboration)</p> <p>1.....</p> <p>2.....</p>

For answers see the Key at the end of the unit.

Developing paragraphs: keeping focussed³

In our first example the focus of the paragraph was Botany Bay and its advantages. How did the writer maintain this focus throughout the paragraph? If we look at the sentences in this paragraph, we can identify a pattern:

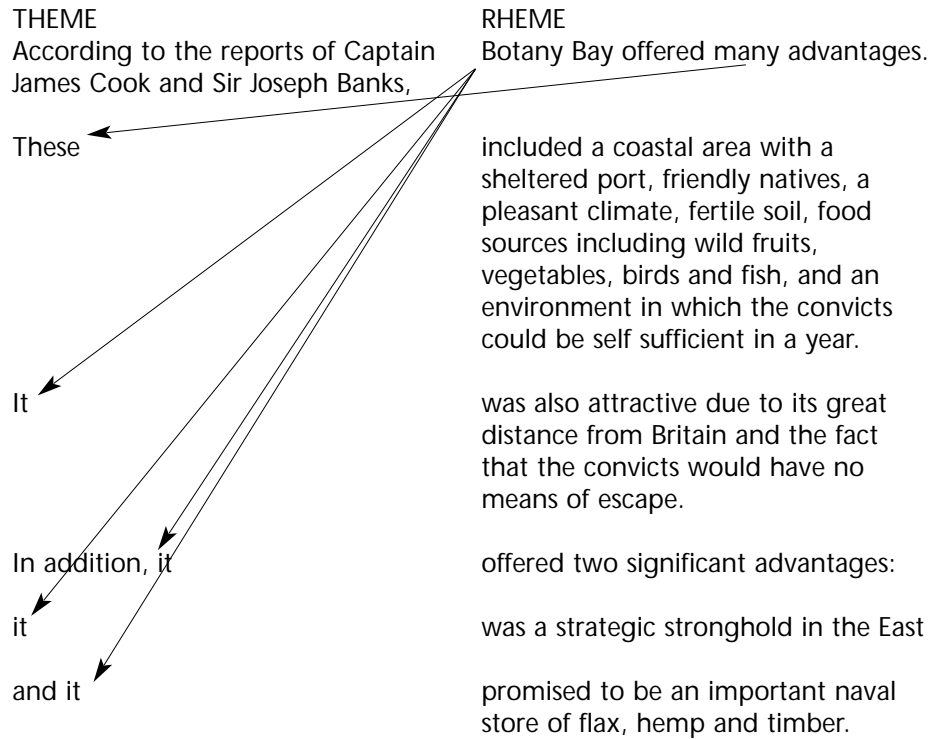
1. According to the reports of Captain James Cook and Sir Joseph Banks, Botany Bay offered many advantages. 2. These included a coastal area with a sheltered port, friendly natives, a pleasant climate, fertile soil, food sources including wild fruits, vegetables, birds and fish, and an environment in which the convicts could be self sufficient in a year. 3. It was also attractive due to its great distance from Britain and the fact that the convicts would have no means of escape. 4. In addition, it offered two significant advantages: it was a strategic stronghold in the East and it promised to be an important naval store of flax, hemp and timber.

Notice that the first element of each supporting sentence refers to information presented in the second half of the topic sentence (the first sentence in the paragraph). That is:

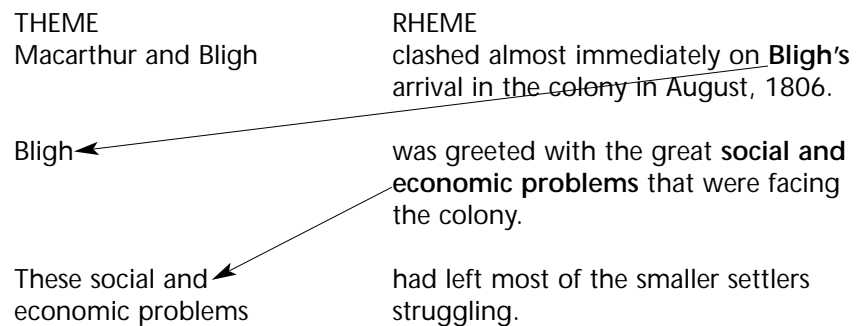
second half of topic sentence: **Botany Bay offered many advantages.**

2. These [advantages]
3. it [Botany Bay]
4. In addition,⁴ **it** [Botany Bay]
it [Botany Bay]
and **it** [Botany Bay]

Each of these underlined words occurred in the first position of the clause⁵ in which it was situated. In English, what is in the first position serves to focus the reader: in other words, it is the starting point for information to follow later in the sentence. The technical term for this component of the clause is called the 'Theme'. The other component of the clause moves readers on from this starting point and so it should introduce 'new' information. This is referred to as the Rheme. In the Botany Bay paragraph the writer maintained the same focus (the advantages of Botany Bay) in the Themes, and built up new information about Botany Bay in the Rhemes. We can show this development diagrammatically:



Another common pattern of Theme development is when the Rheme of one sentence, or components of the Rheme, become the Theme of the following one. This moves the text on from its starting point. That is:



When the Themes throughout the paragraph change, it is important for the Themes of each sentence to flow on from each other to create a consistent text (Ferguson et al., 1995). Consider the following paragraph in which the overall focus is infants' crying:

The compelling sound of an infant's cry makes it an effective distress signal and appropriate to the human infant's prolonged dependence on a caregiver. However, cries are discomfoting and may be alarming to parents, many of whom find it very difficult to listen to their infant's crying for even short periods of time. Many reasons for crying are obvious, like hunger and discomfort due to heat, cold, hunger, illness and the lying position. These reasons, however, account for a relatively small percentage of infant crying and are usually recognised quickly and alleviated. In the absence of a discernible reason for the behaviour, crying often stops when the infant is held. In most infants, there are frequent episodes of crying with no apparent cause and holding or other soothing techniques seem ineffective. Infants cry and fuss for a mean of 1.75 hrs a day at age two weeks, 2.75 hrs a day at age six weeks, and 1 hr a day at age twelve weeks.

from S. Eggins *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics*, Pinter, London, 1994, p. 5.

The Themes in this text are as follows:

The compelling sound of an infant's cry
However, cries
Many reasons for crying
These reasons
In the absence of a discernible reason for the behaviour
In most infants
holding or other soothing techniques
Infants

Notice how the focus begins with the sound of an infant's cry, maintains this focus on crying, moves on to reasons for crying, and finishes with a focus on infants. The order in which information is presented keeps the reader centred specifically on cries, developing points on this topic in a logically sequenced way. In other words, the text flows smoothly.

Task 4.2 Maintaining the focus

The following text is a report on matter. The Theme in each clause has been underlined. Study these Themes and draw arrows (as in the example from **solids** in clause 2 to the Rheme **solids** of clause 1), or make notes in the table provided after the essay to indicate where each Theme has come from.

You should see the patterns of Theme development emerging in each paragraph. You should also notice how the Themes in the topic sentences of each paragraph contain elements of the Rheme in the first sentence of the text. This aspect of Theme development plays an important role in contributing to the overall cohesion of texts such as essays.

1. All matter may be classified as either **solids**, liquid or gas. 2 Solids are firm and have a definite form. 3 Rubber, wood, glass, iron, cotton, and sand are all classified as solids. 4 As the atoms or molecules of a solid are densely packed, 5 and as they have very little freedom of movement, 6 most solids require a considerable force in order to change their shape or volume.

7 Solids may be further divided into two classes: crystalline and amorphous. 8 Crystalline solids include rocks, wood, paper and cotton. 9 These solids are made up of atoms arranged in a definite pattern. 10 When they are heated, 11 the change to a liquid, known as melting, is sharp and clear. 12 Amorphous solids include rubber, glass and sulphur. 13 In these substances the pattern of the atoms is not orderly, 14 and when they are heated, 15 they gradually soften.

16 Liquids, on the other hand, are not rigid. 17 If water, milk, or oil is poured on a table, 18 it will flow all over the surface. 19 The atoms or molecules of liquids attract each other and thereby enable liquids to flow. 20 However, these atoms are loosely structured and 21 they do not keep their shape. 22 Therefore, a liquid will take the shape of any container in which it is poured.

23 Gases, such as air, oxygen, and carbon dioxide, have no fixed shape or volume of their own. 24 They diffuse 25 as they spread out to fill any container. 26 If water is put into a tyre, 27 it will run to the bottom; 28 if air is put into a tyre, 29 it fills the whole space inside. 30 The atoms or molecules of gases are widely spaced and move very rapidly. 31 They therefore expand or compress to fit any area.

Adapted from F. Zimmerman *English for Science* Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1989, p.4.

Tracing themes

Paragraph 1

Theme 2: from the Rheme in sentence 1.

Theme 3

Theme 4

Theme 5

Theme 6

Paragraph 2

Theme 7 from Theme 2

Theme 8

Theme 9

Theme 10

Theme 11

Theme 12

Theme 13

Theme 14

Theme 15

Paragraph 3

Theme 16 from Rheme 1

Theme 17

Theme 18

Theme 19

Theme 20

Theme 21

Theme 22

Paragraph 4

Theme 23 from Rheme 1

Theme 24

Theme 25

Theme 26

Theme 27

Theme 28

Theme 29

Theme 30

Theme 31

Key

Task 4.1 Identifying topic sentences and supporting information⁶

There are a number of users of accounting information who require less detailed reports than those mentioned above, but who still have valid reason to request such information. Employees and their Trade Unions are interested in the financial success and stability of the business as it indicates the scope for possible wage and fringe benefit increases (Barton 1989, p.32). Customers often insist on having a copy of the contractor's statement of financial position. Competitors of public companies are always interested in the operating results and financial positions of their rivals, and suppliers are concerned with the company's ability to pay for any goods supplied on credit.

As well as the questions of who financial information should be directed at and what those groups require that information for, there are other questions that should be considered. For example, should customer satisfaction be given a value and incorporated into financial reports? Sales revenue can be very large in one period, and considerably smaller in the next if dissatisfied customers return items purchased earlier. (Barret, Verastergui 1985, p.261). Another obscure factor is whether or not changing price levels should be reflected in adjustments to financial statements. By considering the two main questions proposed previously, "who requires the information" and "for what reason", answers to these questions may be found; however, they are still surrounded by an air of ambiguity.

ARGUMENT
topic sentence

there are other users of accounting information who require less detailed information

supporting information (elaboration)

- 1. employees and trade unions: to assess scope for wage increases*
- 2. customers: position of contractor*
- 3. rival companies*
- 4. suppliers: to assess company's ability to pay*

ARGUMENT
topic sentence

other questions need to be considered

supporting information (elaboration)

- 1. should a value be put on customer satisfaction*
- 2. what should be done with changing price levels*

4.2 Tracing Themes⁷

Comments

Paragraph 1

Theme 2:	from the Rheme in sentence 1.
Theme 3	new Theme giving examples of solids (from Theme 2)
Theme 4	new Theme describing components of solids (from Theme 2)
Theme 5	Theme <i>they</i> refers to <i>atoms</i> in Theme 4.
Theme 6	from Theme 2

Paragraph 2

Theme 7	from Theme 2
Theme 8	from Rheme 7
Theme 9	from Theme 8
Theme 10	from Theme 8
Theme 11	new Theme but linked to Rheme 10 (<i>heated – melting</i>)
Theme 12	from Rheme 7
Theme 13	from Theme 12 (and Rheme 7)
Theme 14	from Theme 12 (ditto)
Theme 15	from Theme 12 (ditto)

Paragraph 3

Theme 16	from Rheme 1
Theme 17	new Theme giving examples of liquids
Theme 18	from Rheme 17
Theme 19	new Theme outlining an aspect of liquids
Theme 20	from Rheme 19
Theme 21	from Theme 20
Theme 22	from Theme 16 (and subsequently Rheme 1)

Paragraph 4

Theme 23	from Rheme 1
Theme 24	from Theme 23
Theme 25	from Theme 23
Theme 26	new Theme
Theme 27	from Theme 26
Theme 28	from Theme 23
Theme 29	from Theme 28
Theme 30	new Theme but develops Theme 23
Theme 31	from Theme 30

Reference

Ferguson, L. MacLulich, C. & Ravelli, L. (1995) *Meanings and Messages*, Australian Museum: Sydney.

Endnotes

1. The material on topic sentences is adapted from Woodward-Kron, R. Thomson, E. & Meek, J. (2000), *Academic Writing: a language based guide*, CD-ROM, University of Wollongong.
2. from Woodward-Kron, R. (1997) (Revised edn.), *Writing in Commerce*, CALT, University of Newcastle, pp. 21-22.
3. With the exception of the crying babies paragraph and its explanation, this explanation is from *Academic Writing: a language based guide*, CD-ROM.
4. Organising elements such as conjunctions (eg *in addition*) can also appear in first position.
5. The clause, like a sentence, contains a verb. However, a clause can be a smaller unit than a sentence as a sentence can be made up of several clauses.
6. From Woodward-Kron, R. (1997) (Revised edn.), *Writing in Commerce*, CALT, University of Newcastle, pp. 50-51.
7. For simplicity not all clauses and therefore Themes have been highlighted.