An Introduction to Cohesion & Coherence in Academic Papers

- No matter how innovative or compelling your thesis is, its effectiveness ultimately relies on your ability to clearly present your arguments and ideas throughout the body of your paper.
- Creating clear links between each of your sentences and flow within your paragraphs (cohesion) and imparting a sense of unity between your thesis and the presentation of your arguments (coherence) is essential to any successful writing project.

Key Ideas

AXES – The AXES (Assertion, eXample, Explanation, Significance) model is used for structuring individual paragraphs so that they are as complete and cohesive as possible. The general structure consists of making a claim (assertion), providing evidence for your claim (example), explaining why you chose that evidence (explanation), and then showing how it relates to the overall argument of your paper (significance). These elements may sometimes be rearranged or repeated, i.e. AXEXES (two pieces of evidence with explanation) or AXEAXES (two claims with evidence before the significance). See the AXES Handout for more information on this approach.

COHERENCE – Coherence refers to the overall sense of unity among your ideas and clarity of your writing structure. It consists of linking together the key claims you are making in each sentence, each paragraph, and finally in your paper as a whole. Think of this as the macro level of clarity in your paper.

COHESION – Cohesion refers to the construction of individual sentences and the clear relationships you establish between them. Each sentence should connect to the ones before and after it, while providing clear topics (what the sentence is about) and stresses (what is important about the sentence). Think of this as the micro level of clarity in your paper.

SENTENCE STRUCTURE - To help your reader follow the development of your arguments, always begin your sentence with information, concepts, or definitions you have already explained, and then introduce new ideas at the end of the sentence. This familiar first, new last structure will ensure that the presentation of your content follows a logical progression and doesn't confuse or disorient your reader.

LEXICAL SIGNPOSTS - Signposts in your writing help signal connections, transitions, comparisons, etc., between sentences and ideas. They may include words used to elaborate on an idea ("Furthermore," "Similarly,"), indicate a sequence of ideas ("First," "Finally,"), remind the reader of previous paragraphs ("As noted above," "As I have already argued,"), show differences between ideas ("In contrast," "Conversely,"), indicate emphasis ("In particular," "Specifically,"), or build on an existing argument ("In addition to," "Another example of,").

Writing Tips

- Highlight the topic sentence in each paragraph. Are you able to easily identify which sentence it is? Would a reader grasp the main argument of your paragraph just from reading this sentence?

- Next, create an outline using the topic sentences from each of your paragraphs. Does the structure make sense? Could a reader understand the flow of your ideas just from looking at your outline? Are the links between each topic clear and cohesive?

- Try reading your body paragraphs out loud. Is there a logical flow between each sentence? Do they build on each other without being repetitive? Are there gaps of information or jumps to new topics?

- Go back and highlight your signposting language. Does it clearly indicate connections and transitions? Are you too repetitive in word usage? Do your signposts add to or detract from the clarity of your arguments?

- Highlight your sentences using the four AXES elements for developing a successful paragraph (see AXES definition, above). Choose a different color for each component to create a visual accounting of whether your paragraphs are complete and well-balanced.

- If you are struggling to apply any of these elements in your own work, try using some of the above steps to evaluate published journal articles or your class readings. Can you identify the topic sentences in the author's work? Do they use effective signposting language? Can you color highlight the AXES elements in their work? This might help you being to identify and incorporate these steps in your own writing.

Additional Resources

Links:

- **Cohesion & Coherence, EAP Foundation** (www.eapfoundation.com/writing/cohesion)
- **Manchester Phrasebank** (www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk) – A valuable resource for identifying new lexical signposts to make your work more cohesive.
- **Revising for Cohesion, Purdue Writing Lab** (https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/the_writing_process/proofreading/revision_for_cohesion.html)
- **Signposting Language for Improving Cohesion, George Mason University** (https://writingcenter.gmu.edu/guides/signposting-language-for-improving-cohesion

Books:
- Murray, Neil and Geraldine Hughes. *Writing Up Your University Assignments and Research Projects: A Practical Handbook.* McGraw-Hill Education, 2008.
- Swales, John M. and Christine M. Feak. *Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential Tasks and Skills, 3ʳᵈ Edition.* University of Michigan Press, 2012.
- Williams, Joseph M. and Joseph Bizup. *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace, 13ᵗʰ Edition.* Pearson, 2020.

Cohesion & Coherence Checklist

AXES Elements:

✓ The claim I make in this paragraph is:

_____

✓ The specific evidence I use to make this claim is:

_____

✓ I analyzed the evidence by:

_____

✓ The significance of this claim to my overall thesis is:

_____

Grammatical and Structural Elements:

✓ My topic sentence is:

_____

✓ My sentences generally follow an old information first, new information last structure.

✓ Each of my sentences has a clear point and function.

✓ My sentences flow together without gaps in logic, flow, or progression of ideas.

✓ It is clear how my sentences are connected to and build upon each other.

✓ My signposting language clearly indicates connections between ideas.

✓ My signposting language is not overly repetitive.

✓ My paragraph clearly connects to those that come before and after it.

✓ My paper as a whole follows a clear progression of ideas that support my overall thesis.