

# Coherence and Cohesion: A Refresher for Effective Academic Writing

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This lecture serves as a reminder of key principles of coherence and cohesion that you studied in the first semester. As you continue developing your academic writing skills, these foundational concepts remain essential for producing clear, unified, and reader-friendly paragraphs and essays.

## Quick Definitions

**Coherence** refers to the logical flow and clarity of ideas in your writing. A coherent text is one where readers can easily follow the progression of thought, understand how ideas connect, and grasp the overall argument without confusion.

**Cohesion** refers to the grammatical and lexical connections between sentences and paragraphs. Cohesive writing uses specific linguistic devices (transitions, pronouns, conjunctions, repetition) to link sentences together smoothly.

In simple terms: - **Coherence** = unity of ideas and logical organization - **Cohesion** = unity of structure and grammatical connections

Both work together to make your writing clear, professional, and easy to read.

## Why Coherence and Cohesion Matter in Academic Writing

Without coherence, readers struggle to understand your main point or how your evidence supports it. Without cohesion, your sentences feel disconnected and choppy, even if your ideas are sound. Academic readers (including your professors) expect writing that flows logically and connects ideas explicitly. Strong coherence and cohesion demonstrate:

- Critical thinking and clear organization
- Respect for your reader's time and effort
- Professionalism and attention to detail
- Mastery of academic writing conventions

## Achieving Coherence: Logical Flow of Ideas

Coherence is achieved when every sentence in a paragraph relates clearly to the topic sentence, and when paragraphs connect logically to support your thesis or main argument.

### Key Strategies for Coherence

#### 1. Start with a clear topic sentence

Every paragraph should begin with a topic sentence that states the main idea. All other sentences in the paragraph must relate back to this idea.

#### Weak paragraph (lacks coherence):

“Online learning became popular during the pandemic. Many students prefer face-to-face classes. Technology is expensive. Some teachers are not trained in digital tools.”

(These sentences are related to education, but they do not develop a single, unified point.)

### **Coherent paragraph:**

“Online learning presents significant challenges for students in rural areas with limited internet access. Many rural households lack high-speed connections, making it difficult to attend live video classes or download course materials. Even when internet is available, frequent power outages disrupt learning sessions. As a result, students in these areas often fall behind their urban peers, who have more reliable access to digital resources.”

(All sentences support the topic sentence about challenges for rural students.)

### **2. Follow a logical order**

Arrange your ideas in a sequence that makes sense. Common organizational patterns include:

- General to specific (or specific to general)
- Chronological order (for processes or narratives)
- Problem to solution
- Cause to effect
- Most important to least important (or vice versa)

### **3. Maintain consistency**

Stay on topic throughout the paragraph. Avoid introducing unrelated ideas or shifting focus suddenly. If you find yourself writing about a different idea, start a new paragraph.

### **4. Use clear reasoning**

Explain the connections between your ideas explicitly. Do not assume readers will automatically understand why one sentence follows another.

#### **Example without clear reasoning:**

“Formative feedback improves learning. Teachers should give more feedback.”

#### **Example with clear reasoning:**

“Formative feedback improves learning by helping students identify and correct mistakes before submitting final work. When teachers provide specific comments on drafts, students can revise their understanding and strengthen their performance. Therefore, increasing the frequency and quality of formative feedback should be a priority in undergraduate courses.”

## **Achieving Cohesion: Grammatical and Lexical Links**

Cohesion is achieved through specific linguistic devices that connect sentences and create smooth flow. The most important cohesive devices are:

### **1. Transitions and Linking Words**

Transitions signal relationships between ideas and guide readers from one sentence or paragraph to the next. Different transitions serve different purposes.

#### **Common transitions by function:**

**Addition:** also, furthermore, moreover, in addition, additionally, besides

**Contrast:** however, on the other hand, in contrast, nevertheless, nonetheless, yet, whereas, although, while

**Cause and effect:** therefore, thus, consequently, as a result, because, since, due to, for this reason

**Example:** for example, for instance, such as, to illustrate, specifically

**Sequence:** first, second, third, next, then, finally, afterward, meanwhile, subsequently

**Emphasis:** indeed, in fact, certainly, clearly, obviously, of course

**Conclusion:** in conclusion, to sum up, in summary, overall, ultimately

### **Examples in context:**

“Students often struggle with time management. **However**, structured study schedules can help them balance academic and personal responsibilities.”

“Feedback is essential for learning. **Moreover**, it should be timely and specific to be most effective.”

“Many first-year students lack study skills. **As a result**, they perform below their potential in the first semester.”

## **2. Reference (Pronouns and Demonstratives)**

Pronouns and demonstrative words (this, that, these, those) refer back to nouns or ideas mentioned earlier, creating links between sentences.

**Personal pronouns:** he, she, it, they, we, you

**Possessive pronouns:** his, her, its, their, our, your

**Demonstratives:** this, that, these, those

### **Example:**

“Dr. Amara teaches academic writing. **She** has been at MILA University Center for ten years. **Her** students consistently perform well in writing assessments.”

(She refers to Dr. Amara; Her refers to Dr. Amara’s.)

**Important note:** Be careful with vague pronouns. Make sure it is always clear what a pronoun refers to.

### **Vague reference:**

“The university introduced new policies about attendance and grading. **This** confused many students.”

(Does “this” refer to the policies, the introduction, or something else?)

### **Clear reference:**

“The university introduced new policies about attendance and grading. **These new policies** confused many students.”

### 3. Repetition and Variation of Key Terms

Repeating key terms helps readers track your main ideas. You can repeat the exact word or use synonyms and related terms to avoid monotony.

#### Repetition of key term:

“Academic integrity is essential for university education. Without **academic integrity**, the value of degrees is undermined. Therefore, all students must understand what **academic integrity** means in practice.”

#### Variation with synonyms:

“Plagiarism is a serious academic offense. This form of **intellectual dishonesty** not only violates university rules but also harms a student’s learning. When students engage in such **unethical practices**, they deprive themselves of genuine intellectual growth.”

(Plagiarism → intellectual dishonesty → unethical practices)

### 4. Substitution and Ellipsis

**Substitution** replaces a word or phrase with another word to avoid repetition.

#### Example:

“Some students prefer morning classes. **Others** prefer afternoon sessions.”

(Others substitutes for “other students.”)

**Ellipsis** omits words that are understood from context.

#### Example:

“The first exam covers grammar and vocabulary. The second [**exam covers**] reading and writing.”

(The repeated words are omitted but understood.)

### 5. Conjunctions

Conjunctions connect clauses within sentences.

**Coordinating conjunctions:** and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet

**Subordinating conjunctions:** because, although, since, while, if, when, unless, whereas

#### Example:

“Students must submit their assignments on time, **or** they will receive a penalty.”

“**Although** online learning offers flexibility, it requires strong self-discipline.”

### Common Mistakes to Avoid

#### Mistake 1: Missing Transitions

Writing without transitions makes your text feel abrupt and disconnected.

#### Without transitions:

“Online learning has advantages. It requires strong self-regulation. Many students struggle. They need more support.”

**With transitions:**

“Online learning has several advantages. **However**, it requires strong self-regulation, which many students find challenging. **As a result**, these students need additional academic support to succeed in online environments.”

**Mistake 2: Overusing Transitions**

Using too many transitions, or using them mechanically, can make writing feel forced and artificial.

**Overuse:**

“**Firstly**, online learning is flexible. **Secondly**, it allows students to work at their own pace. **Thirdly**, it is convenient. **However**, it also has disadvantages. **For example**, it requires technology. **Moreover**, some students feel isolated. **Therefore**, careful planning is needed.”

**Better:**

“Online learning offers flexibility and allows students to work at their own pace. **However**, it also has significant disadvantages, such as the need for reliable technology and the risk of student isolation. **Therefore**, careful planning is essential.”

**Mistake 3: Vague Pronouns**

Using pronouns without clear antecedents confuses readers.

**Vague:**

“Teachers give feedback and assign grades. **It** is important for learning.”

(Does “it” refer to feedback, grades, or both?)

**Clear:**

“Teachers give feedback and assign grades. **Feedback** is especially important for learning because it guides improvement.”

**Mistake 4: Sudden Topic Shifts**

Introducing a new idea without transition or connection breaks coherence.

**Abrupt shift:**

“Formative assessment helps students improve. The library has extended hours this semester.”

**Logical connection:**

“Formative assessment helps students improve by identifying weaknesses early. To support this improvement, the library has extended its hours this semester, giving students more time to work on revisions.”

**Mistake 5: Lack of Logical Order**

Presenting ideas in random order confuses readers, even if individual sentences are well-written.

### **Poor order:**

“Students should seek help when needed. Time management is important. Attending lectures regularly improves performance. Setting goals helps focus effort.”

### **Logical order:**

“To succeed academically, students should begin by setting clear goals, which help focus their effort. Attending lectures regularly is essential for understanding course content. Effective time management allows students to balance study and other responsibilities. Finally, students should seek help when needed rather than waiting until problems become serious.”

## **Quick Coherence and Cohesion Checklist**

When revising your paragraphs, ask yourself:

### **For Coherence:**

- Does every sentence in this paragraph relate clearly to the topic sentence?
- Have I arranged my ideas in a logical order?
- Have I explained the connections between my ideas?
- Have I stayed on topic without introducing unrelated information?

### **For Cohesion:**

- Have I used appropriate transitions to connect sentences?
- Are my pronoun references clear and unambiguous?
- Have I repeated or varied key terms to maintain focus?
- Have I used conjunctions to show relationships within sentences?
- Does my writing flow smoothly from one sentence to the next?

## **Final Reminders**

Coherence and cohesion are not add-ons or decorations. They are fundamental to clear academic writing. As you draft and revise your work this semester, return to these principles regularly. Strong coherence and cohesion:

- Help readers follow your argument
- Demonstrate your critical thinking
- Make your writing more persuasive
- Meet the expectations of academic discourse