

Transitions

(Adapted from Writing From A to Z: The Easy to Use Reference Handbook, by Charles T. Brushaw *et al.*, and published by Mayfield Publishing Company)

Transitions link and clarify the relationship of what has been said and what will be said. They may link sentence parts, whole sentences, paragraphs, or larger units or sections. A transition may be made with a word, a phrase, a sentence, or even a paragraph. Clear transitions are essential to the **coherence** of paragraphs and compositions.

Transitional Words and Phrases

The following two paragraphs illustrate how transitional expressions can clarify and smooth the movement between ideas. The first paragraph lacks transitional words and phrases; the second paragraph contains them printed in *Italics*.

People had always hoped to fly. Until 1903 it was only a dream. Some thought that human beings weren't meant to fly. The Wright brothers launched the world's first heavier-than-air flying machine. The airplane has become a part of our everyday life.

People had always hoped to fly, *but*, until 1903 it was only a dream. *Before that time*, some thought that human beings were not meant to fly. *However*, in 1903 the Wright brothers launched the world's first heavier-than-air flying machine. *Since then*, the airplane has become a part of our everyday life.

The following list gives some of the more common transitional words and phrases, classified according to their function.

- *Addition and Sequence*: again, also, besides, even more important, finally, first, furthermore, in addition, in the first place, last, likewise, moreover, next, second, then, third, too
- *Cause and Effect*: accordingly, as a result, because, consequently, for, for this reason, hence, so, then, therefore, thus
- *Comparison*: also, in the same way, likewise, similarly
- *Contrast*: although, at the same time, but, conversely, even so, however, in contrast, nevertheless, nonetheless, notwithstanding, on the contrary, otherwise, still yet
- *Example*: for example, for instance, in fact, indeed, of course, specifically, that is, to illustrate
- *Purpose*: for this purpose, for this reason, to this end, with this object
- *Summary or conclusion*: as I have said, consequently, in any event, in brief, in conclusion, in other words, in short, in summary, to sum up, on the whole, that is, therefore
- *Time*: after, afterward, at length, immediately, in the meantime, in the past, later, meanwhile, now, since, soon, then, while

Repetition, Pronouns, and Parallel Structure

In addition to using transitional words and phrases, you can link sentences by using **pronouns**, by repeating key words or ideas, and by using phrases or clauses with **parallel structure**. Notice in the following selection, the repetition of the pronoun *it*, which refers to the civil rights movement. Most of the sentences begin with the words "It gave us," and nearly all the sentences are parallel in structure: it-verb-direct object. In addition, the chain of the related words *living*, *lives*, *life*, and *live* not only provides coherence but also emphasizes the ongoing legacy of the civil rights movement.

If the Civil Rights Movement is “dead,” and if it gave us nothing else, it gave some of us bread, some of us shelter, some of us knowledge and pride, all of us comfort. It gave us our children, our husbands, our brothers, our fathers, as men reborn and with a purpose for living. It broke the pattern of black servitude in this country. It shattered the phony “promise” of white soap operas that sucked away so many pitiful lives. It gave us history and men far greater than Presidents. It gave us heroes, selfless men of courage and strength, for our little boys and girls to follow. It gave us hope for tomorrow. It called us to life. Because we live, it can never die.

-Alice Walker, “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good was It?”

Transitions between Paragraphs

All the means discussed previously for achieving transition between sentences-especially the repetition of key words or ideas-can be used for transition between paragraphs. However, longer transitional elements can be used as well. One technique is to begin a paragraph by summarizing the preceding paragraph, as is done in the italicized sentence at the beginning of the second paragraph that follows

From the very beginning of his illness, ever since he had first been to see the doctor, Ivan Ilych’s life had been divided between two contrary and alternating moods: now it was despair and the expectation of this uncomprehended and terrible death, and now hope and an intently interpreted observation of the functioning of his organs. Now before his eyes there was only a kidney or an intestine that temporarily evaded its duty, and now only that incomprehensible and dreadful death from which it was impossible to escape.

These two states of mind had alternated from the beginning of his illness, but the further it progressed the more doubtful and fantastic became the conception of the kidney, the more real the sense of impending death.

-Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*

Another technique for transition between paragraphs is to ask a question at the end of one paragraph and answer it at the beginning of the next. In the following selection, Pat Mora asks a question in two successive paragraphs and answers it in the third.

Your mother tells me that you have begun writing poems and that you wonder exactly how I do it. *Do you perhaps wonder why I do it? Why would anyone sit alone and write when she could be talking to friends on the telephone, eating mint chocolate chip ice-cream in front of the television, or buying a new red sweater at the mall?*

And, as you know, I like people. I like long, slow lunches with my friends. I like to dance. I’m no hermit, and I’m not shy. *So why do I sit with my tablet and pen and mutter to myself?*

There are many answers. I write because I’m a reader. I want to give others what writers have given me, a chance to hear the voice of people I will never meet. Alone, in private. And even if I meet these authors, I wouldn’t hear what I hear along with the page, words carefully chosen. Woven into a piece unlike any other, enjoyed by me in a way no other person will, in quite the same way, enjoy them. I suppose I’m saying that I love the privateness of writing and reading. It’s delicious to curl into a book.

-Pat Mora, “A Letter to Gabriela, A Young Writer”