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Author(s): Kristie S. Fleckenstein

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# An Appetite for Coherence: Arousing and Fulfilling Desires

Kristie S. Fleckenstein

The American Dream is to lose weight quickly and to keep it off without going hungry. But that's all it is: a dream. Wouldn't it be great if you could lose weight by swallowing a pill? The truth is no diet aid or diet pill will take excess weight off unless a person takes in less calories than he/she burns. Some pill packets even suggest a 1,200-calorie-a-day diet program for weight loss. How effective and safe are these diet products, though? Every year seems to bring a new drug for weight loss, and every year Americans seem to spend millions of dollars on diet aids that are ineffective and may even be dangerous.

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These two introductory paragraphs, so similar but so different, demonstrate the "before" and "after" texts created by Shelly, a struggling writer in an introductory college composition course. Beyond one or two minor stylistic changes and the omission of a single sentence, the two paragraphs are identical, save in the arrangement of the sentences. And that revision in order is the difference between a coherent introductory paragraph and an incoherent introductory paragraph.

Helping students create coherent texts is one of the most difficult jobs that composition teachers have. Part of that difficulty lies in the fact that coherence is as much a reader-based phenomenon as it is a writer-based creation. As Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler point out in *Introduction to Text Linguistics*, writers may provide the linguistic cues, but it is the readers who fill the gaps between ideas by building relationships that bridge ideas, and

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Kristie S. Fleckenstein, assistant professor of English, is Director of Composition at Purdue University-Calumet. Her research interests include the role of affect and of imagery in reading and writing.

who thereby create their sense of order (Longman, 1981). Form is not a product, but a process, Kenneth Burke says, “an arousing and fulfillment of desires,” “the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite” (qtd. in Sonja Foss, Karen Foss, and Robert Trapp, *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric*, Waveland, 1985. 162).

No wonder it is difficult for inexpert—and expert—writers to create coherent texts, both locally, at the sentence and paragraph levels, and globally, at the full-text level. To judge the success or failure of a particular passage requires the writer to step out of his or her shoes as a writer and examine the passage as a reader. Writers need to perceive the desires or expectations their texts arouse in their projected readers and then check to see if those desires are satisfied. Such a difficult role reversal is not easy to achieve, especially for students previously taught that form, for instance the five-paragraph form, is imposed on content or for those students taught to write without a consideration of their readers.

A method that helps writers shift perspectives involves getting them outside their texts. The technique requires students to examine what they do as readers to create coherent meaning, apply those discoveries to an incoherent text, then examine their own in-progress essays for problems with coherence.

The first part of this classroom strategy demonstrates that coherence is not “in the text,” but something that readers create with the aid of cues provided by the writer. Begin this process by offering students the following brief passage, instructing them to read it, noting any words or sentences they don’t understand, and then, if possible, to summarize it:

Sally first tried setting loose a team of gophers. The plan backfired when a dog chased them away. She then entertained a group of teenagers and was delighted when they brought their motorcycles. Unfortunately, she failed to find a Peeping Tom listed in the Yellow Pages. Furthermore, her stereo system was not loud enough. The crab grass might have worked, but she didn’t have a fan that was sufficiently powerful. The obscene phone calls gave her hope until the number was changed. She thought about calling a door-to-door salesman but decided to hang up a clothesline instead. It was the installation of blinking neon lights across the street that did the trick. She eventually framed the ad from the classified section.

Most students are unable to create a coherent meaning out of this passage, although they understand all the words and most of the sentences. They merely can’t weave the disparate ideas into any understandable pattern. So the next step is to discuss the reasons for their difficulty. For instance, three sentences that commonly confuse my students are (1) “The crab grass might have worked, but she didn’t have a fan that was sufficiently powerful”; (2) “She thought about calling a door-to-door salesman but decided to hang up a clothesline instead”; and (3) “She eventually framed the ad from the classified section.” During full-class discussions, my students complain that they can’t

connect crab grass to fans in the first sample sentence. They point to a similar problem between door-to-door salesman and clothesline. Finally, in the last sample sentence, students say that they don't know what ad Sally refers to.

Following a discussion of reading frustrations, provide students with the following sentence: "Sally disliked her neighbors and wanted them to leave the area." Students discover that this sentence provides them a context to draw from. Now, they can use their background knowledge about human motivation, neighborhood irritations, and offensive strategies to build relationships within and between sentences. Thus, they are able to relate crab grass and fan by filling the gaps with the cause-effect knowledge (1) that crab grass is the bane of the suburbanite's lawn and (2) that the fan was meant to infest the neighbor's lawn with crab grass. Door-to-door salesmen and clotheslines are connected in an additive relationship as ploys designed to irritate the neighbors, and the ad, associated with Sally's implied goal of driving her neighbors out, is the real estate ad announcing the sale of the neighbor's home.

These observations serve as a basis for the discovery that coherent meaning results from the relationships we as readers build between ideas—if we can't build relationships by bridging the gaps between ideas—ideas such as crab grass and fans, we create no coherent sense of the text.

The orienting statement about Sally's sentiments can also be used to demonstrate that readers approach a text with an array of expectations already cued (including the expectation that the text confronting us is coherent). Then, as we read, we are guided by those expectations, or appetites, and sample the text to satisfy or revise those appetites. By discussing the expectations the first sentence elicits, students discover how those expectations become predictions, hypotheses, and guesses which they validate or revise as they read.

The next step of this strategy is to move students from a contemplation of themselves as readers to practical work as peer editors. Sharing and revising an incoherent text helps effect this shift from reader to writer. Using an overhead projector, project an incoherent paragraph, but separate each sentence with three to four lines of space. With a sheet of paper, cover everything except the first sentence. Ask students to write down (a) what they think the idea of the sentence is, (b) what they think will come next, and (c) what they think the entire essay will concern. Uncover the second sentence and ask the students to decide if this sentence is consistent with their expectations. Discuss differences in opinion, but without attempting to arrive at any premature closure. Then, with the first two sentences as a basis, ask students to again write down what they think the essay will be about and what will come next. Continue predicting and discussing those predictions throughout the paragraph. As the last step in the exercise, have the students pool their observations and decide, as a class, how best to revise the paragraph so that it achieves a greater sense of coherence. Ask students to make specific suggestions for revisions: what to rearrange, add, or delete.

Following this whole-class work, divide the students into small groups, pass out copies of a second paragraph, and ask each group to read, analyze, and suggest changes for that paragraph, just as they had done for the first one. Finally, ask students to take the first one or two paragraphs of their current essays-in-progress and "stretch them out"—separate each sentence by three or four lines of space—and bring them to share with their peer partners for an analysis of paragraph coherence.

During the third stage of this experience with coherence, students apply to *each other's papers* the techniques they applied previously as a group. The sample below illustrates a typical interchange between writer and peer partner. I have selected this particular interaction for a variety of reasons. First, both the writer, Trish, and the peer editor, Terry, were average writers from a developmental college writing class. Second, this sample reflects Trish's work with her first complete, formal draft of her first essay. Finally, I chose this sample because Terry did not follow the precise instructions provided in class; however, he still produced valuable reactions and advice for Trish. For instance, students were asked to (a) jot down the focus of the sentence under analysis, (b) jot down what they expect next, and (c) jot down what they expect from the entire essay. Terry frequently failed to include his expectations and the focus; instead, he explained why the sentence under examination did or did not meet his expectations, and he provided on-the-spot advice. Terry's success as a peer editor illustrates that the effectiveness of the strategy is not a product of its exact application.

1. In high school I had been in the printing class for about 3 and 1/2 years.
  - a. The sentence is about printing class.
  - b. Your essay's about printing class.
2. When we started out, there were 6 or 7 black students in a class that was predominately white and hispanic.
  - a. It's about the kids in the class.
  - b. The sentence doesn't correspond with the previous sentence. I am a bit confused.
  - c. The paper is still about printing class.
3. As the years progressed and I was in my junior year there was one black student left: me.
  - a. This should have been your second sentence because it corresponds with the first sentence.
  - b. The problems she had in her class because she was the only black person.
  - c. The essay's going to be about the problem that she had for being black.
4. I had become extremely talented with lithographic photography, which is making negatives of line copy (words), halftone pictures (regular pictures into dot form), and the PMT process (taking drawn art and making it usable for printing).
  - a. This sentence doesn't fit because you started talking about being the only black and then you start explaining what you did in the class. The reader is like, the only black and so what?

- b. Being the only black gave these advantages of learning how to work the many different equipments.
  - c. Learning how to work the equipment in the printing class.
5. Due to the fact I was working with light sensitive film a lot, I was in the darkroom, which is away from the rest of the class, and where I am hardly seen.
- a. This sentence doesn't fit. What does light sensitive film have to do with equipment or being the only black? About now I am confused.
  - b. The sentence is about her class work.
  - c. I'm not sure what the paper will be about. Discrimination in the printing class? her work?
6. This made the class look as if it was all white and hispanic, and gave the impression to the customers as well.
- a. This sort of follows because she's still talking about working out of sight, but what customers is she talking about?
  - b. The customers gave all the credit to the white students.
  - c. The discrimination from the printing class.
7. When I was seen in the class room, which was rare, and a customer would walk in, they would be shocked to see me.
- a. This sentence fits and your essay is starting to make sense. I think it is about being discriminated by your printing class.
8. It was then I realized the subtle prejudice of my printshop teacher, Mr. H---
- a. I finally got the connection in your last sentence and the topic of the essay is clearer.

*Suggestions for Revision* I finally figured out your topic, but I still can't make all the sentences fit. Maybe you should explain about your print class and the customers. Why were you in the same class for 3 years? Maybe take out the sentence on what you did in class. I don't know how to fit it in. Can you combine the ideas in the first three sentences? Or start out with your first sentence, add a couple of sentences about the class, then explain that by your junior year you were the only black? Then say you were out of sight a lot?

Trish revised her first paragraph into the following:

In high school I had been in a printing class for about 3 and 1/2 years. The class was a production class, which meant that students could take it for a number of years and that we learned about printing by doing jobs for customers. When I started out as a freshman, there were about 6 or 7 other black students in a predominately white and hispanic class, but by my junior year I was the only black student left. Also, because I was working with light sensitive film much of the time, I was in the darkroom, away from the class and hardly seen. Customers had the impression that the class was all white and hispanic. When customers saw me in the class room, which was rare, they would be shocked. It was then that I realized the subtle prejudice of my printshop teacher, Mr. H---

With Terry's help, Trish was able to revise her first paragraph into a much tighter introduction, one that consistently cued her topic for the entire paper and one that maintained greater unity between ideas.

Beyond the value of this technique as a revision tool, it also helps students achieve more writing control. For instance, one pedagogical goal in any writing class is to wean our students from dependence on our judgment and to foster reliance on their own judgment. This strategy for creating coherence facilitates that movement, in that it provides what Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia call executive controls: a method of determining when the composing process derails and a procedure for correcting the derailment (*The Psychology of Written Composition*, Erlbaum, 1987). This strategy does that; it can be effectively wielded by writers without access to peer partners or with less-than-satisfactory peer partners, as the following example demonstrates. The three sample paragraphs below are from the first, second, and final drafts of a paper by a writer in a developmental freshman composition class. Tina, whose peer partner frustrated her with an inconsistent performance, applied the strategy herself, as she worked through several versions of her introduction.

*Draft I:* Remember if you don't follow your dreams, you'll never know what's on the other side of the rainbow; you'll never know what you can find at the top of the mountain; you'll never know your journey's best. By being a pushover, you let people dictate what you can and cannot do. Letting people run over you, or pushing your thoughts aside and not caring how you feel, you'll never know what you're capable of in terms of success but the failures you possess will always carry with you. Of course the failure is being afraid to speak and tell somebody or anybody how you truly feel. By bottling up your personal frustrations that you have problems saying aloud, your insides are going to explode. That explosion can be dangerous or even fatal that you get to the point of going out and killing that person who pushes you around or develop a high blood pressure which will eventually result in a heart attack. On the other hand, you can let your frustrations out and let that weak point of your character work to your advantage. Believe me, the second choice is safer and more productive.

*Draft II:* For all of you pushovers out there, never let anyone tell you what to do or what's impossible for you. Remember, if you don't follow your dreams, you'll never know what's on the other side of the rainbow or what's at the top of the mountain. So always speak up for what you believe in, because if you don't do it for yourself, no one will. If you continue to be a pushover, a sucker for the rest of your life, you'll be a rug for the rest of your life. People will continue to step all over you. Believe me. I know. I was once a pushover myself. A pushover. An opponent who is easy to defeat or a victim who is capable of no effective resistance. Do not and I repeat do not subject yourself to that despicable low-life group called: the suckers.

*Draft III:* Pushover. An opponent who is easy to defeat or a victim who is capable of no effective resistance. Do not, and I repeat, do not subject yourself to that despicable, low-life group called the suckers. If you continue to be a sucker for the rest of your life, you'll be a rug for the rest of your life. People will continue to step all over you. Believe what I am saying. I was once a pushover myself.

Although Tina's introduction still has problems, it does reflect a tighter focus and greater coherence than do her previous two efforts.

This way to help students perceive incoherence in their writing also possesses peripheral benefits. First, it emphasizes the importance of reading in writing. To be good writers, students must also be good readers. The focus of discussions can switch easily from the students' writing process to an examination of specific cues that can help readers create the relationships the writers seemingly have in mind. Second, the strategy also offers a productive way to introduce transitions and cohesive ties as linguistic cues that signal to readers an underlying relationship. This method centers students' attention on the underlying relationship of the transitional word cues, not on the word itself. Finally, students can examine the texts of professional writers, tracing shifts and noting how these writers ensure smooth bridges between ideas, gaining a greater sense of the rhetorical conventions that govern discourse. Again, this fosters the students' growth as readers, as well as writers.

Shelly's, Trish's, and Tina's revisions are hardly problem free, but each demonstrates the increasingly-effective coherence this strategy promotes. Perhaps the most rewarding outgrowth of this technique is watching students gain confidence in their own ability to create meaningful texts and to create meaning from texts without a teacher's continued intercession.

#### Conference Announcement

Rhetoric Society of America, May 21–24, 1991. Park Inn International, Minneapolis. Address S. Michael Halloran, Dept. of Language, Literature, and Communication, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY 12180-3590.

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