

Editing your Writing for Content, Coherence and Cohesion

What is editing?

You should always edit your assignments very carefully before submitting them for assessment. Some people equate editing with proofreading: checking for grammar, spelling and punctuation mistakes. This type of editing is important (see the *EDU handout Editing your Writing for Grammar Mistakes*). However, your assignments will also require another kind of editing. You may not have selected the appropriate theory and practical examples to respond to the question, or there may not be a smooth flow of ideas. Before editing your assignments for grammar, punctuation and spelling, you also need to edit them for content, coherence and cohesion.

What should you do when editing for content?

Read through what you have written and ask yourself:

- Is all the content relevant?
- Is any one section too long?
- Is there anything missing, or anything that is redundant?
- Is the discussion of theory and concepts balanced by use of examples?
- Are references provided for all the ideas and information you have taken from published sources?

What should you do when editing for coherence?

When you are sure the content of your assignment is appropriate, you should edit for coherence – for the manner in which all the parts of your assignment fit together to make one well connected answer to the assignment question.

Read through what you have written and ask yourself (or ask a friend to read your writing and tell you):

- Does the assignment make sense to someone who is not in your course?
- Is the argument consistent?
- Are the ideas presented in a logical order?
- Have you made the structure of your argument **explicit**?
- If there are headings, are they expressed in a parallel form?

- Does each paragraph have one idea and is it expressed clearly in a topic sentence?
- Are there phrases or sentences that provide a clear transition from one paragraph to the next? (It is often the case that the consistency of the argument is made clear in these transition phrases or sentences.)

What should you do when editing for cohesion?

Coherence refers to the overall connectedness of the ideas in a piece of writing. Cohesion refers more specifically to connections between sentences. There are a number of ways in which you can create cohesion between sentences:

- Transition from old information to new
- Summary words
- Thematic consistency
- Parallel constructions
- Lexical ties
- Transition signals.

Transition from old information to new

Place known information at the beginning of each sentence and place new information at the end of each sentence. The new information that is placed at the end of the first sentence then becomes known information to be placed at the beginning of the next sentence.

Example: From the moment you wake each morning to the moment you fall asleep again at night, your life is filled with choices. Your first choice is when to get up ... (McTaggart, Findlay & Parkin 1999, p. 1.4).

Summary words

This also involves transition from old information to new, but instead of beginning the next sentence with the same or a similar word to the one with which the previous sentence ended, you begin the new sentence with a word that summarises several words in the previous sentence or the whole idea. The summary word is usually used together with a reference word such as “this” or “these”

Example: At any one point in time, there is a fixed amount of labour, land, capital, and entrepreneurship. These resources can be used to produce goods and services ... (McTaggart et al. 1999, p. 2.4).

Thematic consistency

The theme of a sentence is the word or phrase that begins the sentence. If the sentence beginnings all relate to the main idea of the paragraph it is easier for the reader to focus on that idea.

Example: Scarcity is not poverty. The poor and the rich both face scarcity. A child wants a 75 cent can of soft drink and a 50 cent chocolate bar but has only \$1 in her pocket. She experiences scarcity. Faced with scarcity, we must choose among the available alternatives (McTaggart et al. 1999, p. 1.4).

In this passage there are two related themes: one that relates to scarcity and one that relates to the people who experience it.

Parallel constructions

If sentences in which the ideas are connected have similar patterns it is easier for the reader to see the relationship between the sentences.

Example: In ordinary speech, the word 'market' means a place where people buy and sell goods such as fish, meat, fruits, and vegetables. In economics, a market has a more general meaning (McTaggart et al. 1999, p. 2.9).

Lexical ties

The repetition of words or synonyms in a paragraph assists the reader to see the connection between the sentences.

Example: Markets coordinate individual decisions through price adjustments. To see how, think about your local market for hamburgers. Suppose that too few hamburgers are available so that people who want to buy hamburgers are not able to do so. To make the choices of buyers and sellers compatible, buyers must scale down their appetites or more hamburgers must be offered for sale (or both must happen). A rise in the price of hamburgers produces this outcome. A higher price encourages producers to offer more hamburgers for sale. It also curbs the appetite for hamburgers and changes some lunch plans. Fewer people buy hamburgers, and more buy hot dogs. (McTaggart et al. 1999, p. 2.10).

In this paragraph there are many words that have to do with buying and selling: market, buy, sell, sale, buyers, sellers, and price. There is also another string of related words that have to do with decisions, choice and plans. In addition, there is a third string that connects with food: hamburgers, appetite, lunch, hot dogs.

Transition signals

Transition signals are words or phrases that introduce a sentence and indicate its relationship to the previous sentence.

Example: The opportunity cost of producing an additional tape is the number of bottles of cola we must forgo. Similarly, the opportunity cost of producing an additional bottle of cola is the quantity of tapes we must forgo (McTaggart et al. 1999, p. 3.3).

There are many different transition signals. There are transition signals to indicate sequence; logical divisions of an idea; time; example; comparison; contrast; addition; opposition and conclusion. Go to the following site for lists of transition signals and their meanings:

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_transition.html

NOTE: Be careful in your use of transition signals. A good piece of writing, like a well-constructed freeway, should not need many signal/signposts to keep the reader on the right track. And if you use the wrong signal or signpost the result can be disastrous. At all costs you need to avoid sending the readers' comprehension off in the wrong direction.

Reference words

Reference words are words that point back to words in previous sentences, for example, *the, the other, another, the others, some, this, these, that, those*. Comparative expressions can also act as reference expressions.

Example: A feature of the labour market for young workers is a system of minimum wage rates that have to be paid. These rates are an example of a minimum price law.... The minimum wage rate system is a consequence of government intervention in the labour market.... In other cases, instead of setting the price, governments fix a quantity.... Even more frequently, governments impose taxes.... In yet other cases, governments try to ban markets. Those for drugs like heroin are obvious examples (McTaggart et al. 1999, p. 7.2).

Reference words are very useful cohesive devices. Care should be taken to ensure that their reference is clear.

Examples were taken from McTaggart, D. Findlay, C. & Parkin, M. 1999, *Economics*, 3rd edn., Addison Wesley Longman, Melbourne.