



University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center
Creating a Reader-Friendly Text: Signposting and Cohesion
Adapted and Expanded from Michelle Cox, Cornell University

Cultures differ on their expectations for the roles writers and readers take in relation to a text. According to John Hinds (1987), some cultures (like the US) favor “writer-responsible” writing, in which the writer has the primary responsibility for making sure that ideas are clearly communicated to the reader, while other cultures (like Japan) favor “reader-responsible” writing, in which the reader is responsible for making sense out of the writer’s ideas.

While all cultures likely use both styles in different contexts, in US academic writing, writer-responsible text is preferred. Here, we share strategies for writing writer-responsible texts through **signposting** (language that creates a route for a reader through a text, such as forecasting statements, topic sentences, and conjunctive adverbs) and **cohesion** (such as the movement from given-to-new information in sentences and the use of demonstrative pronouns).

Signposting

Forecasting statements: These statements announce to the reader content that will appear in the text. Examples: “I will argue ...”; “In this section, I will describe ...”; “This paper proposes ...”

Topic sentences: Typically the first line of each paragraph, topic sentences are used to indicate to the reader the focus of the paragraph.

- One test to see if topic sentences are used effectively is to copy and paste all first sentences to another document, and then read through them to see if a reader could understand the direction of the paper just based on these sentences.
- Another test is to highlight each paragraph’s key gist or idea. If you find your highlighted sentences are “buried” in the middle of paragraphs or that you tend to “back into” your key ideas at the ends of paragraphs, you may want to revise to *lead* with these topic sentences at/near the start of your paragraphs.

Conjunctive adverbs: Also called “linking words,” conjunctive adverbs are words and phrases used to show the reader how the idea in one sentence related to that in the sentence before it.

Highlighting or emphasizing a point: Importantly, Indeed, In fact, More importantly, Furthermore, Moreover, It is important to highlight

Changing direction or creating a comparison: However, Rather, In contrast, Conversely, On one hand/on the other hand, In comparison, Another point to consider is

Adding a similar point: Similarly, Likewise, Again, Also

Summarizing: Finally, Lastly, In conclusion, To summarize, Overall

Acknowledging something and moving to a different point: Although, Even though, Despite, Notwithstanding

Following a line of reasoning: Therefore, Subsequently, Hence, Consequently, Accordingly, As a result, As a consequence, To this end

The Academic Phrasebook (<http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk>) can also take you to many other phrases for Describing Methods, Reporting Results, Discussing Findings, and more!

Cohesion

Movement from given to new information: This sentence pattern creates a sense of “flow” for readers. When sentences don’t move from given to new information, they may seem choppy and unclear as in this example¹:

Molecules are comprised of covalently bonded atoms. Molecules’ reactions are controlled by the strength of the bonds. Molecules, however, sometimes react slower than bond strength would predict.

These sentences lack “flow” because each sentence starts with “Molecules” in the subject or topic position rather than with the information given at the end, in the stress position, of the previous sentence:

Molecules ... bonded atoms Molecules ... bonded strength Molecules ... bonded strength
would predict
A → B A → C A → D

Now consider this revision:

Molecules are comprised of covalently bonded atoms. Bond strength controls a molecule’s reactions. Sometimes, however, those reactions are slower than bond strength would predict.

Now, the relationships between the ideas presented in the sentences are clearer because the second and third sentence takes the key idea presented *at the end of* the previous sentence and represents it in some form *at the beginning of* the next sentence (

Molecules ... bonded atoms → Bond strength ... reactions → Reactions ... bonded strength
would predict
A → B B → C C → D

We can also use **demonstrative pronouns** (this/these) to move from given to new information, summarizing (rather than simply repeating) at the start of a new sentence the term or idea that the previous sentence ended with²:

In recent years, the number of students applying for PhD programs has increased steadily, while the number of places available has remained fairly constant. **This situation** has resulted in intense competition for admission.

According to a recent survey, 26% of all American adults, down from 38% 30 years ago, now smoke. **This decrease** can be partly attributed to the mounting evidence linking smoking to fatal diseases, such as cancer.

¹ From Schimel, J. (2012). *Writing Science: How to Write Papers that Get Cited and Proposals that Get Funded*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 125-6.

² From Swales, J. and Feak, C. (2012). *Academic Writing for Graduate Students*. University of Michigan Press, p. 43.