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Connections Count Part II: Orienting and Substantive Transitions

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

Last month we began exploring transitions and their usage. We covered generic transitions, their placement, and the importance of using the transition with the exact right meaning. This month, we are turning our attention to other categories of transitions: orienting and substantive. We will then end with a simple editing tip to help ensure “pop” in your writing.

Orienting transitions

Generally, orienting transitions help readers locate, either logically, physically, or temporally, ideas in the sentence. They give the reader context to understand the information that follows in the sentence. The most common orienting transitions in legal writing are those that refer to cases and those that indicate time or date.

In Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District, Justice Roberts noted that IDEA demands more than offering a de minimis education to children with disabilities.¹

“In February 2012, Endrew’s parents filed a complaint with the Colorado Department of Education.”²

Orienting transitions can also help readers see historical context.

“Thirty-Five years ago, [the Supreme Court of the United States] held that the Individuals with Disabilities Act establishes a substantive right to a ‘free appropriate education’ for certain children with disabilities.”³

Orienting transitions are particularly helpful to readers who are encountering facts, ideas, or arguments for the first time. Thus, because legal writers frequently write to persuade a reader who knows little or nothing about the client’s case, orienting



transitions help the reader connect the argument on the page to the reader’s mind.

Substantive transitions

Substantive transitions are the heavy-lifters of transitions. Instead of providing merely context for the reader, substantive transitions provide context, new content, a connection, and substance. Substantive transitions are formed by using a technique called dovetailing (yes, like the joints in the drawers of a well-made piece of furniture).

Dovetailing is really a simple pattern: place information from the first sentence (old information) at the beginning of the second sentence and then introduce new information.

Here’s an example.

“While Rowley declined to articulate an overarching standard to evaluate the adequacy of the education provided under the Act, the decision and the statutory language point to a general approach: To meet its substantive obligation under the IDEA, a school must offer an IEP reasonably cal-

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culated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child’s circumstances.

The “reasonably calculated” qualification reflects a recognition that crafting an appropriate program of education requires a prospective judgment by school officials.”⁴

The repetition of *reasonably calculated* in the sentences serves as a transition—it is the old information from the first sentence that is repeated in the second. This is the simplest form of a dovetail—the repetition of a phrase from the first sentence in the second sentence.

Writers can, however, choose to find a word or phrase that sums up the ideas in the first sentence to use as the substantive transition in the second sentence.

“Progress through this system is what our society generally means by an ‘education.’ And access to an ‘education’ is what the IDEA promises. Accordingly, for a child fully integrated in the regular classroom, an IEP typically should, as Rowley put it, be ‘reasonably calculated to enable the child to achieve passing marks and advance from grade to grade.’

This guidance is grounded in the statutory definition of a FAPE.”⁵

In this example, Justice Roberts used *guidance* to sum up the Court’s idea from *Rowley* that he discussed in the previous sentence.

Writers can use the following techniques to create substantive transitions:

1. Move the connecting idea to the end of the first sentence and to the beginning of the second sentence;
2. Repeat key words from the first sentence in the second sentence;
3. Use pronouns in the second sentence to refer back to nouns in the first sentence;
4. State the connecting idea in a specific form in the first sentence and then restate it in a summarizing noun or phrase in the second sentence;
5. Use hook words such as “this,” “that,” “these,” “those,” and “such” before a repeated key word or summarizing noun or phrase.⁶

Editing tip: Heavy v. Strong transitions

While orienting and substantive transitions tend to be strong, generic transitions can be too heavy to begin a sentence.

Compare these:

However, if the average legal writer edited vigorously, the flow of her writing would improve.

If the average legal writer edited vigorously, however, the flow of her writing would improve.

But if the average legal writer edited vigorously, the flow of her writing would improve.

The second and third examples are much less clunky than the first example. While each shows contrast, the last best helps the reader grasp the writer’s meaning.

I’ll admit that I am guilty of drafting with heavy sentence-starting transitions. It does not, however, help my writing. Thus, I add in an editing step to take those heavy transitions—accordingly, consequently, however, moreover—out. I either move them to later in the sentence, or I replace them with a stronger, shorter transition—so, hence, but. I also try to use substantive transitions instead of simply using generic transitions in every sentence.

Conclusion

Remember that the effective use of transitions helps the reader see the connections between your ideas and arguments. Spending a little time adding or improving transitions can turn the reader’s experience from one like driving without a map to one that includes voice navigation.

I add in an editing step to take those heavy transitions—accordingly, consequently, however, moreover—out.

Sources

- Anne Enquist & Laurel Currie Oates, *Just Writing: Grammar, Punctuation, and Style for the Legal Writer*, chpt. 4 (2009).
- Bryan A. Garner, *How to Bring a More Conversational Style to Your Writing*, available at www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/garner_conversational_writing, last visited Mar. 8, 2017.

Endnotes

1. 2017 WL 1066260 at *12 (U.S. Mar. 22, 2017).
2. *Id.* at *7.
3. *Id.* at *4.
4. *Id.* at *10.
5. *Id.* (citations omitted).
6. Anne Enquist & Laurel Currie Oates, *Just Writing: Grammar, Punctuation, and Style for the Legal Writer*, 63 (2009).

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