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Connections Count Part I: Generic Transitions

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

In a recent class one of my students challenged me to explain why transitions are so important to the reader. Hmmmm, I thought—desperately trying to think of an explanation that would be short and sweet. Well.... I began.

And then I struck on this idea: asking a reader to go through a brief that didn't contain any transitions would be like me asking you to drive me through a large city without voice navigation. Very frustrating!

Transitions serve an important function in any piece of writing; they connect the ideas in sentences and paragraphs and show the reader how lines of reasoning are advancing. These simple words let the reader know when to expect more detail or when to expect a different topic or when to expect a counter-point.

There are three basic types of transitions: generic, orienting, and substantive. We will look at generic transitions this month. Next month we will turn to orienting and substantive transitions, and then finish with a few editing tips to help make your transitions even more effective.

Generic transitions

Generic transitions are used in every type of writing. They serve many functions, but each function tells the reader how to link the ideas in the sentences connected by the generic transitions. The following chart categorizes the most common generic transitions by function.

Placement

Using generic transitions should be simple as they signal shifts inherent in our thoughts. So all a writer should have to do is insert the appropriate transitions every time the writer has a shift in thought.

Generic Transitions					
For Contrast					
However On the other hand	In contrast On the contrary Unlike Despite	Nevertheless Conversely Notwithstanding	Nonetheless Alternatively Even so Rather	But Still yet Instead	Though Although Even though That Being Said
For Comparison					
Similarly Likewise	Analogously In the same way For the same reason	In like manner By the same token			
For Cause and Effect					
Therefore Consequently As a result	Accordingly Thus Because	Hence Since	So For		
For What Is True In Most Cases					
Generally	In general	Generally speaking			
For Addition					
Also Further In addition	Moreover Too Additionally	Besides And Furthermore			
For Examples					
For example For instance	To illustrate Namely	Specifically That is			
For Emphasis					
In fact Above all	Certainly Indeed	Still Clearly			
For Evaluation					
More important Unfortunately Fortunately	Surprisingly Allegedly	Arguably Unquestioningly			
For Restatement					
In other words That is	More simply Simply put	To put it differently			
For Concession					
Granted	Of course	To be sure			
For Resumption After Concession					
Still Nevertheless	Nonetheless Even so	All the same That being said			
For Time					
Subsequently Recently Meanwhile	Initially Formerly	Later Eventually Shortly there- after	Simultaneously At the time	Earlier Afterwards Until now	Since By the time
For Place					
Adjacent to Next to	Here Beyond	Nearby Opposite to			
For Sequence					
First, second, third Former, latter In the first place	Next Final Finally	Then Later Primary, secondary			
For Conclusion					
In summary In sum	To sum up Finally	In brief In short	To conclude In conclusion	Thus Therefore	Consequently To review

Even so, placement is not so easy. Remember that as the writer you know when there is a shift in thought (these are, after all, your thoughts), but the reader doesn't just know. So it's important to place the transitions before the shift in thought; that way, the reader can anticipate and better absorb the shift.

Compare these:

Many of Idaho's neighboring states have a law respecting a potential employer's access to a job applicant's social media accounts. Idaho does not have such a law, however. It is possible that because its neighboring states all have such laws that Idaho will soon have such a law, though.

Many of Idaho's neighboring states have a law respecting a potential employer's access to a job applicant's social media accounts. Idaho does not, however, have such a law. Though it is possible that because its neighboring states all have such laws that Idaho will soon have such a law.¹

The placement of the transitions *however* and *though* near the beginning of the sentences with the shift in thought allows the reader to more quickly understand that the second sentence will contrast with the first and the third with contrast with the first two. Simply put, the second example is easier for an unfamiliar reader to understand.

When to use

I wish that there were some magic wand that writers could use to know exactly when and where to place a transition. Unfortunately, no such wand exists. Indeed, there isn't even a foolproof formula that tells us when and where to use transitions. Instead, each writer must make his own decision.

I will, however, offer some helpful guidance to use when making those decisions. First, remember that using transitions is a matter of style and preference. Each writer will develop

her own ear for when and where to use one, and each writer can observe when and where other legal writers use transitions. Generally, though, writers don't omit transitions that show contrast or help the reader understand how two seemingly dissimilar facts are similar.

Second, you can read your writing aloud. Your ear will pick up on when a sentence jolts the reader versus when it eases the reader into an idea. Likewise, you can ask someone else to read your writing aloud to you. Then you can stop that reader as she is reading to ask how the ideas are connected or what should come next. If she can't tell you or guess the next sentence, you can add transitions to help.

No matter which technique you might use, always keep the reader in mind.

Precision matters

Finally, don't forget about the difference in meaning between transitions. While none of us is likely to confuse transitions in different categories, there are differences in meaning between the transitions within categories. For instance, I began this paragraph with *finally* because it contains the last topic I will address this month. Using *consequently* (a transition that also signals a conclusion) wouldn't have had the same meaning and would likely have confused you.

Generally, though, writers don't omit transitions that show contrast or help the reader understand how two seemingly dissimilar facts are similar.

Subtle differences in meaning also exist between transitions in the same category. *For example* suggests that the material is typical. In contrast, *specifically* suggests the material is precise and exact. Thus, while both tell the reader that you are providing an example, the reader would expect a different type of example depending on which transition you use.

Stay tuned for more exciting tips on transitions!

Source

• Anne Enquist & Laurel Currie Oates, *Just Writing: Grammar, Punctuation, and Style for the Legal Writer*, chpt. 4 (2009).

Endnotes

1. Some grammarians still insist that a sentence should never begin with *however*.

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