Connections Count Part I: Generic Transitions

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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.
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.

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**


**Endnotes**

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