

Building Coherence: from the sentence, to the paragraph, to the essay

You probably know what it sounds and feels like to talk to someone who's being incoherent. Their sentences don't follow one another, their words bounce around like random molecules, and their train of thought becomes a collision of fragmented ideas. The same can happen in our writing, particularly in first drafts when the overriding logic is not yet fully formed. But creating coherence takes more than supplying the standard transitional language to link thoughts. Coherence is built into the paper from the bottom up – from the sentence, to the paragraph, to the essay as whole – by creating patterns of language, syntax, sound, images, and relationships that occur throughout the paper. Below are a few strategies for constructing these patterns.

Let's begin with the first few sentences from "Invisibility in Academe," an essay by the celebrated poet, feminist and gay activist Adrienne Rich. As you read, see if you can identify certain words or sentence structures that seem to repeat and vary. Rich writes:

The history of North American lesbians under white domination begins with the death penalty prescribed for lesbians in 1656 in New Haven, Connecticut. Three hundred years later, in the 1950s, lesbians were being beaten in the city streets, committed to mental institutions, forced to undergo psychosurgery, often to their parents' instigation. Thirty years after that, in the mid-1980s, despite the struggles and visions of both the Women's Liberation movement and the gay liberation movement, lesbians are still being assaulted in the streets—during the past year in the streets of Northampton, Massachusetts, the site of a women's college near which I live.

There are many moments of repetition here that help to create a sense of coherence.

- Perhaps you noticed that Rich reiterates certain synonyms, in particular verbs like "domination," "beaten," "committed," "forced," "assaulted," etc. By weaving these key terms into her sentences, we understand that suppression and violence will be central concepts in her essay.
- You also likely noticed that Rich continually marks the passage of time: "Three hundred years later," "Thirty years ago," "in the mid 1980s," and "during the past year." By emphasizing time, she creates a sense of movement and momentum—as time moves from the past to the present so, too, does the violence. History is literally repeating itself.
- Interestingly, Rich not only uses time but space to evoke the sense that the violence is approaching closer to home. She begins more generally and with a larger geographical space, "The history of North American lesbians" and ends with a personal, specific, nearby location, "the site of a women's college

near which I live.” Thus, Rich sets up certain parallels between past and present as well as between the public and private.

We see that coherence relies on more than simple transitional language. Like a painter creates a sense of wholeness through the repetition of line, color, shape, etc., a writer also constructs wholeness through parallelism and the repetition of words, syntax, and image.

Let’s turn to the next paragraph in Rich’s essay. This time look for evidence of how these patterns not only repeat but also vary and grow more complex. Rich continues:

Beside all this, invisibility may seem a small price to pay (as in “All we ask is that you keep your private life private” or “Just don’t use the word”). But invisibility is a dangerous and painful condition, and lesbians are not the only people to know it. When those who have power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled female, or speak with a different accent or dialect than theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. Yet you know you exist and others like you, that this is a game with mirrors. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength, but collective understanding—to resist this void, this nonbeing, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard.

What carries over from the last paragraph to this new one?

- Certainly, images of domination repeat: “power to name,” “to socially construct a reality,” “authority of a teacher.” But now Rich points to an abstract authority rather than a tangible force. She emphasizes position and privilege over material power. In essence, her thinking about power becomes more complex, nuanced.
- In turn, there are still references to violence, but of a different kind. Whereas the first paragraph stresses the visible repercussions of unjust force (death, beatings, etc.), this next paragraph seems interested in a more subtle psychological or spiritual impact that renders “a dangerous and painful condition” of feeling “invisible” and unseen—leaving one to suffer from “psychic disequilibrium.” Therefore, although we clearly see and hear a through-line from one paragraph to the next, we also understand that her ideas are evolving. She now wants to make visible what is largely invisible.
- You also may have noticed that the recipients of this more subtle violence have broadened in scope. Rich is no longer writing only to the lesbian community, but to anyone who has not been seen or heard—“whether you

are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a different accent or dialect than theirs.” Her essay’s focus is expanding.

- In the same way, whereas the first paragraph sets up parallels between cultural history and personal history, as well as between the past and the present, this new paragraph mines a similar tension between the individual and the collective, but with an added complexity. Her ideas mature as we begin to see how intricately entangled one’s individual self is to the dominant culture.

It’s more than just repetition that creates coherence then. It’s repetition with a difference. Or, better put, it’s a gathering as well as a moving forward. A paragraph looks back at the one before, reiterating its language and concepts, but it also looks ahead to related ideas that add new thoughts and grow in complexity as the essay progresses.

As a final exercise, read the third paragraph from Rich’s essay and see if you can uncover those places where prior words, phrases, images, and relationships are repeated while also growing in scope and complexity.

I have been for ten years a very public and visible lesbian. I have been identified as a lesbian in print both by myself and others; I have worked in the lesbian-feminist movement. Here in Claremont, where I have been received with much warmth and hospitality, I have often felt invisible as a lesbian. I have felt my identity as a feminist threatening to some, welcome to others; but my identity as a lesbian is something that many people would prefer not to know about. And this experience has reminded me of what I should never have let myself forget: that invisibility is not just a matter of being told to keep your private life private; it’s the attempt to fragment you, to prevent you from integrating love and work and feelings and ideas, with the empowerment that that can bring.

Rich, Adrienne. “Invisibility in Academe.” *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose, Second Edition*. Eds. Laura Buzzard, Julia Gaunge, Don LePan, Mical Moser, & Tammy Roberts. Toronto: Broadview Press, 2011. 217-18. Print.