

Sign-posts

'Properly written texts are like spiders' webs: tight, concentric, transparent, well-spun and firm.' Theodor Adorno

Linking phrases

It is crucial that the reader can find her way about in your essay. She needs to know where you have got to (for example, what you think you have established at each stage in your discussion), she needs to know how what you are saying at *this* point connects with what you have said before and what you go on to say next, she needs to know that with this sentence you are drawing a conclusion or beginning a new line of argument, and so on. Paragraphs are one crucial aid to this: we will come to those in a moment. But in addition to these you need to give the reader regular signposts that will help her to see what is going on at each stage. What I mean by 'signposts' includes well-placed statements of what you have just done, what you are about to go on to do, and so on. At a key point in an essay on euthanasia you might say, for example:

In the preceding three paragraphs I have argued that there is no morally significant distinction between killing a patient and letting a patient die. If this argument is sound, it undermines the much-used appeal to a distinction between *active* and *passive* euthanasia. That, however, leaves open the possibility that there is a morally important distinction between cases in which a drug, which it is known will lead to the patient's death, is administered with the *intention* that the patient should die and cases in which it is administered with some other intention. We must now turn to a consideration of this suggestion.

Another form of signposting involves the use of 'linking words and phrases'. These are words and phrases that make clear the connections between different stages of your discussion: they indicate that at this point you are drawing a conclusion, replying to an objection, introducing a new argument, qualifying what you have just said, and so on. Here are some examples of individual linking words: *but, however, therefore, because, similarly, whereas, furthermore*. Particularly useful examples of linking phrases include: '*This shows that ...*', '*It has been argued that ...*', '*On the other hand ...*', '*However, this conflicts with ...*', '*If that is correct then....* ', '*In conclusion, ...*'

Now try the following exercise. Insert in the following passage the missing linking phrases from the list below. The original passage, with the link phrases included, is printed on the next page. Once you have completed the exercise check how you got on. (You will not need all of the words and phrases listed below; and you will need some of them more than once. I should, perhaps, also warn you that the author of this passage has a habit of breaking the rule that one should not start a sentence with a conjunction. My own view – others disagree – is that this is an excellent rule to break whenever, by doing so, you can make the structure of your thought clearer.)

“Is it true that we cannot distinguish occasions of error - things like illusions, delusions, misinterpretations of what we are seeing - from others? To think about this we would want to introduce a distinction. It may be true that we cannot detect occasions of illusion and error at a *glance*. That is what makes them illusions. is it true that we cannot do so *given time*?, it seems to be true that we can do so: we can learn, ..., to mistrust images of

shimmering water in the desert as typically misleading illusions or mirages - tricks of the light. , the fact that we can detect occasions of deception is surely *presupposed* by Descartes' own argument. Why so? Descartes is presenting the first premise as a place to start from - a known truth. we only *know* that the senses sometimes deceive us because further investigations - using the very same senses - *show* that they have done so. We find out, ... , that a quick glimpse of shimmering water misled us into thinking there was water there. we discover the mistake by going closer, looking harder, and if necessary touching and feeling, or listening. , we only know, for instance, that a quick, off-the-cuff opinion about the size of the Sun would be wrong because further laborious observations show us that the Sun is in fact many times the size of the Earth. the second premise only seems true in the sense of 'we cannot distinguish *at a glance* whether our senses are deceiving us.' to open the way to Descartes' major doubts, it would seem that he needs 'we cannot distinguish *even over time and with care* whether our senses are deceiving us.' this last does not seem to be true." (Simon Blackburn, *Think*, pp 23-4)

but, on the contrary, but worse, in addition, however, therefore, because, for instance, similarly, so, whereas, and, hence, furthermore, on the other hand, this shows that, if that is correct then, in conclusion

Here is the passage with the linking words filled in in italics.

“Is it true that we cannot distinguish occasions of error - things like illusions, delusions, misinterpretations of what we are seeing - from others? To think about this we would want to introduce a distinction. It may be true that we cannot detect occasions of illusion and error at a *glance*. That is what makes them illusions. *But* is it true that we cannot do so *given time*? *On the contrary*, it seems to be true that we can do so: we can learn, *for instance*, to mistrust images of shimmering water in the desert as typically misleading illusions or mirages - tricks of the light. *But worse*, the fact that we can detect occasions of deception is surely *presupposed* by Descartes' own argument. Why so? *Because* Descartes is presenting the first premise as a place to start from - a known truth. *But* we only *know* that the senses sometimes deceive us because further investigations - using the very same senses - *show* that they have done so. We find out, *for instance*, that a quick glimpse of shimmering water misled us into thinking there was water there. *But* we discover the mistake by going closer, looking harder, and if necessary touching and feeling, or listening. *Similarly*, we only know, for instance, that a quick, off-the-cuff opinion about the size of the Sun would be wrong because further laborious observations show us that the Sun is in fact many times the size of the Earth. *So* the second premise only seems true in the sense of 'we cannot distinguish *at a glance* whether our senses are deceiving us.' *Whereas* to open the way to Descartes' major doubts, it would seem that he needs 'we cannot distinguish *even over time and with care* whether our senses are deceiving us.' *And* this last does not seem to be true." (Simon Blackburn, *Think*, pp 23-4)

Paragraphs

Paragraphs are one of the most crucial aids to giving structure to your essay. You must think carefully about how you break your writing up into paragraphs. Each paragraph should contain one idea. It should be possible to summarize the line of thought in your essay in terms of a series of sentences each of which captures the key idea of each successive paragraph.

Other Forms of Structuring

I have stressed that the paragraph is a crucial unit in giving structure to your essay. There are, however, additional techniques that you might consider using. In particular, you may find it helpful to break your essay up into several numbered sections, or even sections with their own sub-headings. I believe that almost any piece of writing over, say, 5000 words would benefit from such a division into smaller units; but even with shorter pieces of work *anything* that might help to make the structure clearer to the reader should be seriously considered. Suppose, for example, that, the introduction and conclusion aside, it is clear to you that your argument divides up into three main stages: in the first stage, perhaps, you consider Jones' argument for a certain view, in the second you consider Smith's arguments against that view, and in the third you offer your own argument for a slightly modified version of the view. (Within each of these stages there will, of course, be further sub-divisions into individual paragraphs.) It might, in such a situation, be a great help to the reader if you divided the essay up into five numbered sections: the three stages of your argument plus the introduction and the conclusion. What is more, *attempting* to divide your essay up in this way might well be a help to you in seeing whether your essay really does have a coherent structure: if, when you try to divide your essay into such sections, you find that there are one or two paragraphs that

don't fit quite as they should, that may be a sure sign that they are in the wrong place (or should not be there at all.)