

Does My Writing Flow?

One of the most frequent questions I receive as a tutor is some variation of this one strange question. Students ask: “I just want to make sure it flows,” or “Can you tell me if it flows?” or even “I can't tell if it flows good.” But there's a fundamental flaw to this question, one that we have to answer before we can tell if our writing “flows”: **what do we mean by flow?** It's a vague word, one that we use when we're not sure what else to say—and it's hard to solve a problem if we don't know exactly what the problem is.

What do we mean when we ask “does my writing flow?”

My goal for this handout will be to answer these tough questions by breaking them down into smaller sections, beginning with an abstract approach and concluding with a specific method for improving “flow.” We can figure out if writing “flows” by focusing on certain aspects of a paper or essay, and by asking a series of smaller questions we can answer the larger one (“does my writing flow?”). We'll begin by considering how we can think about our writing **metacritically**, move onto **reverse engineering** your writing to check its “flow”, head towards the home stretch by looking at **topic sentences**, and finally see how **transitions** acts as flow “keywords”.

1. Thinking Metacritically: Pretend You're the Reader, Not the Writer

For our purposes, **meta** means **about**. In short (I promise this won't get too confusing) thinking “metacritically” means *thinking about how you think about your writing*. When you ask “does my writing flow?” you're asking a specific question about your paper: probably something akin to “does this make sense?” or “do you understand how this all works together?” You are concerned about your **reader**. Your paper makes sense to you (mostly...) because you're the one who wrote it, but at some point—between the thought in your head and the words on the screen—something happened (something confusing). And now you're not sure if you really said what you wanted to say in the order you wanted to say it.

One way of approaching this is to **pretend you're the reader of your paper, not its writer**. This can be hard, of course, but if you take a step and think to yourself: “would this make sense to someone else? what if someone else in my class read this?”¹ Thinking this way can only get you so far, but give it a shot and you'll be surprised by how much different the paper looks just with a change of perspective.

2. Reverse Engineering: Make an Outline and/or Split Your Paper into Sections

A more active, and therefore more typically useful method, of figuring out if your paper “flows” is to do a little “reverse engineering” by **breaking your paper into smaller sections** now that you've written it. If you're feeling particularly intense, you can **create an outline** of your paper, as if you were reading an essay for class and taking notes.² What is the key point of each paragraph? Do the points follow one after another in an order that makes sense? Are any of the paragraphs out of place? Does each sentence in the paragraph belong in that paragraph? Asking yourself these questions can be hard if you're looking at your complete paper, but if you see it in outline form things will become clear to you in ways you couldn't see before.

Even if you're not up for making a complete outline (or you're not very good at outlining—lots of people aren't; no need to feel bad) you can **add headings and sections to your paper**. Think about most of the books and essays you read for class: they're split into chapters, sub-chapters, and sections, often with headings telling the reader what each section is about. For most of the papers you write, sections and headings aren't necessary, but you can make use of them, if only for yourself, in order to see the main “parts” of your paper and how they work together.

¹ Do NOT think about whether it will make sense to your professor. Sure, he or she is the one who will ultimately be reading it. But trying to put yourself in the place of your professor is a sure way to scare and confuse yourself. I recommend instead trying to imagine yourself as one of your classmates.

² Don't compare the paper to your original outline (if you made one). Make an entirely new outline.

3. Topic Sentences: Write Them (Even If You Didn't Originally)

The easiest, and frequently the most successful, way to improve the “flow” of your paper is to **focus on topic sentences**. A topic sentence is almost always the first sentence of a paragraph, and it describes the main point of the paragraph, letting the reader know what the purpose of the paragraph is. When you use topic sentences, your reader will invariably find it easier to follow your thoughts and argument, thus improving the “flow” of your entire paper.³

Of course, it’s not always easy to know exactly what the topic of a paragraph is before you’ve written it, so you can’t write a nice, clear topic sentence when you were writing the paper. But you can add or fix topic sentences **after** you’ve written your paper! Especially if you’re worried about whether you’re writing “flows,” focus on topic sentences—writing them, improving them, moving them from elsewhere in a paragraph. If there's one thing I want you to learn from this handout it's this: **adding or improving your topic sentences will ALWAYS improve the “flow” of your paper.**

4. Transitions: “Flow” Keywords

Transition words like “although” or “therefore” are keywords that you can use to improve the “flow” of your paper. These words act as guideposts indicating the relationship between thoughts, sentences, or paragraphs. You can always make your essay “flow better” by adding transitional words and phrases, and by using the best transitions possible. As you write and revise, spend some time building your vocabulary of transitions.

Below is a handy list of transitional words and phrases you can use to improve the “flow” of your paper:⁴

Transitional Words & Phrases

- **To show causes and effects:** accordingly, as a result, because, consequently, hence, so, then, therefore, thus
- **To show comparisons:** also, in the same way, like, likewise, similarly
- **To show contrasts or exceptions:** although, but, even though, however, in contrast, instead, nevertheless, nonetheless, on the contrary, on the one hand . . . on the other hand, still, yet
- **To show examples:** even, for example, for instance, indeed, in fact, of course, such as
- **To show place or position:** above, adjacent to, below, beyond, elsewhere, here, inside, near, outside, there
- **To show sequence:** again, also, and, and then, besides, finally, furthermore, last, moreover, next, too
- **To show time:** after, as soon as, at first, at the same time, before, eventually, finally, immediately, later, meanwhile, next, simultaneously, so far, soon, then, thereafter
- **To signal a summary or conclusion:** as a result, as we have seen, finally, in a word, in any event, in brief, in conclusion, in other words, in short, in the end, in the final analysis, on the whole, therefore, thus, to summarize.

³ This definition of topic sentences was adapted from www1.aucegypt.edu/academic/writers/paragraphs.htm.

⁴ My list is from Richard Bullock and Francine Weinberg’s *The Norton Field Guide to Writing: With Handbook* (New York: Norton, 2009), 277. For even more transitional words and phrases, visit virtualsalt.com/transits.htm.