

# Teaching those missing links in writing<sup>1</sup>

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*Cohesive devices are crucial in writing, for they turn separate clauses, sentences, and paragraphs into connected prose, signalling the relationships between ideas, and making obvious the thread of meaning the writer is trying to communicate. These linking devices, however, have been found to be problematic for English language students, perhaps because the methods used to teach them have been misleading. Most composition or writing texts categorize cohesive devices according to function, thus ignoring their semantic and syntactic restrictions, and giving students the erroneous idea that they can be used interchangeably. More effective strategies are suggested for presenting these links, including methods of teaching not only inter- and intra-sentence connections, but the linking of larger units of discourse as well.*

Numerous devices exist for connecting ideas in writing. Halliday and Hasan (1976), in their exploration of connecting devices, identified five major categories of cohesive ties. In addition, parallel structure and even tense can signal relationships within written texts. While English language students need to learn to identify and use the whole variety of linking devices, they particularly need careful instruction in the use of *conjuncts*—those connectives more specifically referred to in grammars as coordinating conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions, and conjunctive adverbs or transitions. They need to learn not only the words themselves, but the relationships they signal within and between sentences and between larger units of discourse.

Teachers of writing have all seen student compositions in which the meaning or intent has been obscured, either because these conjuncts are missing or because the links used are inappropriate semantically or syntactically. The following, taken from a student paper, is a case in point:

Men and women in the village share the chores equally. Men sometimes take care of the children and women sometimes trade with other tribesmen. *Nevertheless*, the women participate in politics and religious ceremonies.

Here the student probably intended a link that signifies addition, but erroneously chose one that indicates contradiction, thereby confusing the reader who has certain expectations about what can and cannot follow the particular conjunct used. Many examples similar to the one above appear in our students' writing. Unfortunately, we get so distracted by the inappropriateness or total absence of conjunction that students are rarely given credit for attempting to put into practice the devices we have urged them to use.

**A brief survey**

Cohesive ties are important because they turn separate clauses, sentences, and paragraphs into units of connected prose which refer back and forth to each other. Because these conjuncts signal a 'relation between an element in a text and some other element that is crucial to the interpretation of it' (Halliday and Hasan 1976:8), they make obvious and visible the writer's 'line of thought' (Broadhead and Berlin 1981:306). Researchers are beginning to point out that these ties are an important property of writing quality (Witte and Faigley 1981:195–7), indeed, that they may be essential for preserving the author's meaning (Raimes 1979). Without conjuncts, it would be extremely difficult to make sense of connections between ideas, for these linking words alert us to the intended relationship, preparing us to anticipate the ideas that follow. It is precisely because of this anticipated relationship that the student example cited above and others like it prove to be so problematical.

Whereas native speakers of English generally learn to use these cohesive elements as they do other aspects of language, English language students seem to have great difficulty in mastering them (Dubin and Olshtain 1980:356–62). Cohen *et al.* (1979) found that non-native speakers of English were particularly troubled by markers of cohesion in their reading. Yet another study, focusing on the ability to use cohesive links in writing, found that conjunction caused many problems (Bacha and Hanania, 1980). Furthermore, the researchers hypothesized that these problems may stem 'from a restricted knowledge of linking words in the English language and the logical relationship associated with each' (Bacha and Hanania 1980:251), rather than from the differences between the rhetorical systems of the two languages, as Kaplan's well-known theory would have us believe (1967).

**Traditional approaches**

It seems that, despite the critical role that conjuncts play in writing, English language students are not always able to take advantage of them. This may be primarily because they have not been taught to identify them during reading instruction or to use them correctly in their writing. What they *have* been offered, if composition texts are any reflection of our teaching strategies, are lists of cohesive devices categorized according to function. The following list, taken from a recent ESL writing text (Bander 1980:8–10) is a representative example:

Transitions that qualify: *but, however, although, though, yet, except for*

- 1 But the clerk refused to answer.
- 2 The letter came two days too late, however.
- 3 We hoped, though, that she would change her mind.
- 4 Yet there was still a chance that he would win.
- 5 Except for one girl, all the hikers returned.

Transitions that contrast: *unlike, in contrast, whereas, on the other hand, instead*

- 1 Unlike the Porsche, the Cadillac is a large car.
- 2 In contrast, the red fluid does not lose its color.
- 3 The husband wanted a boy, whereas the wife wanted a girl.
- 4 On the other hand, a student needs time to relax.
- 5 Instead, the new law caused many problems.

Transitions that concede: *although, nevertheless, of course, after all, clearly, still, yet*

- 1 Although she ran after the train, it left without her.
- 2 He planned, nevertheless, to ask for a promotion.
- 3 It may rain tomorrow, of course.
- 4 After all, you learn to cook many foods in this job.
- 5 Clearly, a garden needs a lot of attention.
- 6 Still, a winter vacation can be pleasant.

Lists such as this can be misleading, for they fail to recognize that 'the most important characteristic of cohesion is the fact that it does not constitute a class of items but rather a set of relations' (Dubin and Olshtain 1980:356). Borkin (1978) points to the absurdity of presenting a list of cohesive ties as if they expressed similar logical relationships, and emphasizes the fact that these connectives *can't* be understood without taking into consideration the discourse contexts in which they appear. Widdowson (1978) makes the same type of criticism of materials and teaching strategies that focus on the conjuncts to be learned rather than on how these links make contextually related ideas clear and logical. Thus, because these lists do not demonstrate how cohesive devices establish the logical relationship between the ideas presented, they are ineffective as an aid in teaching these links. For example, referring to Bander's list, how can students appreciate the meaning of 'on the other hand' unless they have been provided with a sentence which *precedes* the one given? Numerous other problems are created for students when they are given such lists. Some transitional markers may have more than one function in English. For example, 'since' can be used to signal time clauses (as in 'Since we got here last week, the weather has been awful'); or it can signal cause (as in 'Since he didn't study, he failed the test'). Added to this complexity is the fact that a marker like 'since' can be used to signal either time or cause, depending on one's meaning or interpretation as in 'Since you went away, the days grow cold'. The same cohesive link can even function in completely opposite contexts: 'At the same time', for example, can be used to indicate *either* a concurrent temporal relationship *or* opposition. Yet another serious problem is the fact that devices categorized together are not necessarily interchangeable: 'but' and 'however' cannot be substituted for 'on the contrary' or 'on the other hand', although they are often classified together. Even when linking devices in a list *do* serve similar semantic functions, however, the fact that they may carry different grammatical weight causes other difficulties. Thus, if one refers again to Bander's list above, one becomes immediately aware of the problematic nature of categorizing 'but' together with 'however'. If students conclude from consulting such a list that these two words are syntactically equivalent, they may succeed in connecting their ideas, but may create sentences that are not acceptable grammatically. It is obvious from all of this that providing students with a knowledge of conjuncts is no easy matter, for students must not only learn the individual meanings of these links and their semantic restrictions, that is, what relationships they express and which ones are appropriate in which contexts; they must also learn their grammatical restrictions, that is, why linking devices that are *lexically* similar cannot be used to perform the same *syntactic* functions.

### **Suggested teaching strategies**

Rather than the typical textbook approach of presenting lists of conjuncts categorized according to meaning, it would be more effective to begin by

classifying linking devices according to their grammatical functions. In other words, coordinating conjunctions (e.g. 'and', 'or', 'but'), subordinating conjunctions (e.g. 'because', 'although', 'if'), and conjunctive adverbs (e.g. 'on the other hand', 'nevertheless') should all be introduced separately. In this way, students could learn how each type of marker works within the sentence and between sentences. They could learn that coordinating conjunctions *connect* independent clauses, that subordinating conjunctions *transform* the independent clauses to which they are appended into subordinate ones, and that conjunctive adverbs have *semantic* weight, but no *grammatical* function. As students learn these necessary distinctions, they can also be taught the appropriate punctuation for each type of connective. Shaughnessy has pointed out that this is the only way to introduce punctuation, for 'the study of punctuation ought not to begin with the marks themselves but with the structures that elicit these marks' (1977:29).

It is not enough, however, to teach students the different categories of connectives and how each type operates grammatically; it is this grammatical emphasis that has 'narrowed unduly our conception of conjunctive devices' (Holloway 1981:215). They must learn to differentiate the linking devices found within each grammatical category semantically. Explicating Saussure, Sommers points out that 'meaning is differential or diacritical, based on differences between terms rather than essential or inherent qualities of terms' (1980:385). Students therefore need to understand what happens, for example, when 'but' is used instead of 'and' or when 'although' is used instead of 'because'.

### Completion exercises

The following types of exercises are easy to devise and can help students learn how a particular connective indicates a particular relationship between the ideas presented.

- 1 The following examples lack subordinating conjunctions. Consider the relationship between the two clauses and fill in an appropriate conjunction for each example.
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_ the weather is favorable, we will go to the beach.
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_ the weather is favorable, we will stay home.
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_ the weather is favorable, we can't go to the park.
- 2 The following examples lack subordinate clauses. Consider the subordinating conjunction used and write an appropriate subordinate clause for each example.
  - a. Even though \_\_\_\_\_, he is not a happy man.
  - b. Because \_\_\_\_\_, he is not a happy man.
  - c. He is not a happy man whenever \_\_\_\_\_.
- 3 The following examples lack transitional devices. Consider the relationship between the two sentences and fill in an appropriate transition for each example.
  - a. China is opening its door to the West. It will probably always remain a traditionally Eastern culture.
  - b. China is opening its door to the West. Its traditionally Eastern culture is likely to undergo some change.
  - c. China is opening its door to the West. The West is embracing much of the culture of the East.

- 4 In the following examples consider the transitional devices used and complete the sentences so that they are logically related to the other sentence.
- Educators are beginning to conclude that children who watch violent TV programs will act more violently themselves. However, \_\_\_\_\_.
  - Educators . . . themselves. As a result, \_\_\_\_\_.
  - Educators . . . themselves. In fact, \_\_\_\_\_.
  - Educators . . . themselves. Moreover, \_\_\_\_\_.

### ***Sentence combining***

One could also present students with sentence combining exercises consisting of pairs of sentences and ask them to use a particular type of conjunct to connect them. For example, students could be instructed to combine the following pair with a subordinating conjunction:

Mr Jones did whatever his wife asked.  
She complained and yelled all the time.

Some students might suggest 'because'; others might offer 'even though'. By discussing the difference in meaning depending on the particular expression used, students can begin to see how necessary it is to choose the appropriate one.

Once students have learned both the grammatical and lexical distinctions, they can begin to do sentence combining exercises that depend on their ability to manipulate the entire repertoire of links they have been taught. These exercises can be signalled (that is, students can be instructed as to which type of link to use, as in 1 below) or they can be unsignalled, leaving students free to choose a connecting device, as in 2.

- Combine the following pairs of sentences by using the connector indicated.
  - The men were exhausted. They kept fighting the fire. (transition)
  - The college is now offering ESL courses. It is offering a course in black studies. (coordinating conjunction)
  - She studied very hard. She failed. (subordinating conjunction)
  - She studied very hard. She passed. (transition)
  - They were late. They missed the dinner. (subordinating conjunction)
- Combine the following pairs of sentences using any connector you want.
  - Living in a new culture is difficult. It is a valuable experience.
  - Old people in America feel isolated. They feel depressed.
  - Many people are getting divorced. Children are raised by single parents.
  - He was an illegal resident. He was deported back to his country.
  - He has to take the entrance exam. He has to complete the application.

Exercise 2, which is less controlled, would not only check on the students' ability to use the various conjuncts correctly, but give rise to discussion. This is likely to happen either when students come up with alternative ways to say the same thing or when they express something quite differently because of the particular connective used. Students could even be challenged to link the same pairs of sentences in as many ways as they could, thus again illustrating the fact that alternative strategies exist for connecting ideas. Such an exercise illustrates what Frank (1981) calls sentence combining based on a notional-functional approach, since students would be learning the different ways that language can express the same semantic function.

**Longer units of  
discourse**

Exercises, however, should not be limited to sequences of pairs of sentences. Students should learn to work with longer units of discourse. For example, they can be given texts and instructed to identify the linking devices in order to determine the relationships they signal between sections of these texts. They can be presented with passages and asked to supply linking words where appropriate. Similarly, they can be asked to supply cohesive devices in passages from which they have been deleted. These deletions could be random or deliberate, depending on one's teaching purpose. After filling in the texts, students could compare the various options proposed. Furthermore, students could be instructed to reorder lists of scrambled sentences in which the links themselves would provide clues as to how the sentences should be sequenced. One variation on this type of exercise consists of identical sets of scrambled sentences differentiated only by the location of the transitional device used:

Unscramble the sentences and number them according to their order.

- 1 \_\_\_\_\_ Some people thought that it was water which came from above the sky through 'windows'.  
\_\_\_\_\_ Before the scientific age, however, people had many strange ideas about rain.  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other people thought that certain gods controlled the rain.  
\_\_\_\_\_ We now know that rain comes from the clouds.  
\_\_\_\_\_ One group of people thought that frogs controlled the rain.
- 2 \_\_\_\_\_ Some people thought that it was water which came from above the sky through 'windows'.  
\_\_\_\_\_ Before the scientific age, people had many strange ideas about rain.  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other people thought that certain gods controlled the rain.  
\_\_\_\_\_ We now know, however, that rain comes from the clouds.  
\_\_\_\_\_ One group of people thought that frogs controlled the rain.

Notice that the resulting sequence for each of these sets of sentences would be different. Of course, sets of scrambled sentences could be stripped entirely of their links, in which case students would not only have to reorder them but also to add the missing connectives. Students would presumably come up with alternative combined passages. Again emphasizing the point that links set up relationships between chunks of discourse, one could provide students with longer passages that lead up to a particular conjunct and ask them to predict the information that is likely to follow. After students have discussed the possibilities, the original passage can be examined and the differences or similarities between the student versions and the actual text can be considered.

**Conclusion**

These exercises are only a few examples of the type that need to be created in order to teach linking words and the relationships they signal. When instruction is based on this kind of approach rather than on the more traditional methods suggested by textbooks, students can be expected to understand what the different conjuncts signify and to learn to use them appropriately in their writing. Teachers need to bear in mind, however, that, important as these links are, learning when *not* to use them is as important as learning when to do so. In other words, students need to be taught that the excessive use of linking devices, one for almost every sentence, can lead to prose that sounds both artificial and mechanical. As

Raimes (1979) put it, when the emphasis is placed on these overt markers rather than the ideas communicated, the 'glue' rather than the message 'stands out'.

Conjuncts are not always necessary, because there are other cohesive mechanisms that help weave various parts of the text together. Conjunction is only one of five categories described by Halliday and Hasan (1976), the other four being reference, substitution, ellipsis, and lexical cohesion. As a matter of fact, this last category, lexical cohesion, has been found to be 'the predominant means of connecting sentences in discourse' (Witte and Faigley 1981:193). The following paragraph (Bronowski cited in Brostoff 1981: 290) illustrates how various types of cohesive devices (such as the repetition of key terms and the use of pronouns, and notably not conjunction) operate together to maintain the logical pattern throughout.

The *process of learning* is essential to our lives. All *higher animals* seek it deliberately. *They* are inquisitive and they *experiment*. An *experiment* is a sort of harmless trial run of some action which we shall have to make in the real world; and this, whether it is made in the laboratory by *scientists* or by *fox cubs* outside their earth. The *scientist experiments* and the *cub plays*; both are *learning* to correct their errors of judgement in a setting in which errors are *not fatal*. Perhaps *this* is what gives them both their air of happiness and freedom in these activities.

It is obvious from this passage that the different means through which cohesion is achieved need to be taught in ways similar to those described here for the teaching of conjuncts. For example, students could be asked to locate pronouns, synonyms, and key terms and to identify their antecedents, as is done in the Bronowski text above.

Finally, teachers need to be especially aware of the fact that, while these explicit mechanisms may render a text cohesive, it may nonetheless not be coherent. Widdowson (1978) has pointed to the distinction between cohesion and coherence, indicating that it is the latter that allows writing to function and to be understood as a unit of discourse. And analyses of student compositions have led researchers to conclude that cohesion is but one feature of discourse that accounts for a text's readability (Brostoff 1981; Witte and Faigley 1981). Our teaching of writing must therefore take into account *all* the factors that interact to produce coherent writing. To ignore these crucial discourse considerations, which should form the basis of all writing instruction—the writer's purpose, the audience, the topic—would not only lead to a failure to address composing itself; it would result in writing in which it was no longer important whether the links were missing or not. □

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### Note

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