

Principles of Academic Writing

Successful academic writing involves the ability to incorporate the following concepts in your writing.

Cohesion: the smooth movement or “flow” between sentences and paragraphs.

Clarity: the meaning of what you are intending to communicate is perfectly clear; the reader does not have to “read between the lines” to guess what you are saying.

Logical Order: refers to a logical ordering of information. In academic writing, writers tend to move from general to specific. In an historical passage, the movement of information is chronological; that is, from old to new. Chronological ordering is also “logical” when describing a disease in that one would expect to learn of symptoms before learning of the treatment.

Consistency: Consistency refers to uniformity of writing style. For example, there is a problem on this page in that “cohesion” and “clarity” are defined in note form (incomplete sentences), whereas “consistency” and “unity” are defined in complete sentences. The writer should be consistent: either use note form or complete sentences. The principle of parallelism also exemplifies consistency (the same grammatical structures should be consistently used in a list). Finally, in citing sources, consistency of style is also essential.

Unity: At its simplest, unity refers to the exclusion of information that does not directly relate to the topic being discussed in a given paragraph. In its broadest sense, an entire essay should be unified; that is, within the paragraphs, the minor supports must support the major supports, which in turn must support the topic sentences. Each of the topic sentences must likewise support the thesis statement.

Conciseness: Conciseness is economy in the use of words. Good writing quickly gets to the point and eliminates unnecessary words and needless repetition (redundancy, or “dead wood.”) The exclusion of unnecessary information promotes unity and cohesion. (This concept, of course, does not include the repetition of information in the conclusion, where the reader expects the writer to “sum up.” However, remember that the ideas must be stated in a different way than they were stated in the text).

Completeness: While repetitive or unnecessary information must be eliminated, the writer has a responsibility to provide essential information on a given topic. For example, in a definition of chicken pox, the reader would expect to learn that it is primarily a children’s disease characterized by a rash. He would also expect to learn that it is also referred to as “varicella.” Failure to provide essential information is indeed an error. Just because a source you have chosen does not include certain information, you are not excused from supplying all the basics in your essay. For this reason as well as others, you must consult a variety of sources.

Variety: Variety helps the reader by adding some “spice” to the text. It is achieved in part by using various methods of joining ideas. In addition to constructing sentences of various types and lengths, the writer should try to use synonyms when possible.

Formality: Academic writing is formal in tone. This means that sophisticated vocabulary and grammatical structures are used. In addition, the use of pronouns such as “I” and contractions is avoided.

