4.6: Clarity and Cohesion

Clarity is achieved by holding to the simplicity of the mathematical equations, and cohesion comes when the thesis statement serves as an overarching umbrella holding all key ideas and evidence together. [Image: Jordan Webb | Unsplash]

Definitions to Remember:

- Clarity = clear and easy to understand
- Cohesion = sticking together
Rules to Remember:

“Whether it is sermons, blog writing, or corresponding through emails, simple and concise writing is a crucial part of how I communicate. I’m always looking for skills to help me enhance my authentic writing voice.” Nick Martineau, Senior Pastor

1. **At the sentence level**, the words you use must be precise – and precisely appropriate for the audience you have chosen. Remember that too many words complicate matters. Instead of explaining yourself, select your words thoughtfully and precisely. Be sure, too, that your punctuation is correct and emphasizes the ideas that you want your audience to focus on. When in doubt, hold to the simple math: subject + verb = sentence.

2. **At the paragraph level**, both clarity and cohesion are achieved when you follow the simple math of the paragraph: topic sentence + evidence = paragraph. Just as the thesis statement functions as an umbrella over the whole essay, consider the topic sentence as an umbrella over the individual paragraph.

3. **At the essay level**, the pattern is the same: Clarity is achieved by holding to the simplicity of the mathematical equations, and cohesion comes when the thesis statement serves as an overarching umbrella holding all key ideas and evidence together. Few writers achieve clarity and cohesion in a first draft, which is why revision is such a key part of the writing process. When you first sit down to write, allow yourself to simply write. When you sit down to revise, apply the simple math of the sentence, paragraph, and essay; keep audience, purpose, and voice always at the forefront; and continually ask yourself So what?

Common Errors:

- **Over-explaining.** Too often we state our purpose once, then restate it again for clarity, and then restate it a third way to be sure our readers have understood what we intended to say. But what happens when we over-explain is our readers get lost in a mire of second-guessing and doubt. If you read an author’s ideas once but still have questions, the best way to have those questions answered is to hear the evidence that is offered in support of the initial claim, rather than a continued restatement of the claim. Over-explaining is all-too-common – both on the internet and in the published world. The next time you find yourself irritated by the length of someone’s communication, ask yourself whether it’s an issue of over-explaining.

- **Over-thinking.** A sister error to over-explaining, over-thinking happens when we are not confident that our ideas are sound or our evidence is adequate. Instead of presenting what we have with authority, assured that the simple math will present our ideas with clarity and cohesion, we wonder about the countless other approaches we could have taken, muddling our initial ideas with insecure meanderings. When you revise, watch for over-explaining and over-editing; both will obfuscate your meaning and alienate your readers.

- **Under-editing.** As we will discuss in Chapter 20, revision is a critical stage of the writing process, and too often writers neglect to edit their work with a keen eye toward clarity and cohesion. When you edit, watch for the extraneous: words, punctuation, phrases, paragraphs, and ideas. Ask yourself if the paper would be weakened or strengthened by the absence. We are often trained by teachers to believe that more is better, but it rarely is.

Exercises:

**Exercise 19.1**

The following paragraph contains sentences that interfere with its clarity and/or coherence. Read the paragraph aloud
and consider (1) what elements are working well and (2) what elements need editing. Remember the simple math of topic sentence + evidence (+optional summary sentence) = paragraph.

I enjoy school because I am always eager to discover new sources and learn about new ideas. When I first walked into my Psychology 101 classroom, the professor opened with a discussion of the id, ego, and superego, and I was surprised to hear how many new ideas I could apply to my own understanding of the world around me. In my Archaeology 242 class, my professor told us she was visiting from a Navajo reservation in New Mexico, and it was fascinating to hear her discussions of skin walkers, pinon nuts, and hogans. As I walked to my English 210 class next, I was thrilled to see the leaves in the quad beginning to turn brilliant oranges and yellows. I stopped to feed a chipmunk the last bite of my bagel, and then I walked into Sturm Hall to meet my English professor. He lectured about books I had heard of but had never had time to read, and I left eager to find Siddhartha, The Little Red Pony, and Middlemarch. And today was only Monday!

**Exercise 19.2**

The following paragraph contains sentences that interfere with its clarity and/or coherence. Read the paragraph aloud and consider (1) what elements are working well and (2) what elements need editing. Remember the simple math of topic sentence + evidence (+optional summary sentence) = paragraph.

My nephew is an excellent baseball player. I attended his district tournament last weekend, and I was impressed to see him get a hit every time he was at bat. Once he even hit a line-drive past the third baseman for a triple that brought in two runners. The coach alternated my nephew between short stop and third base, and I counted six times that he caught infield pop flies for the out. In one play, the second baseman accidentally tripped a runner in the baseline, but the runner recovered and continued home. In the final inning, my nephew scooped up a grounder as it came off a bunt, tagged a runner headed for third base, and then threw hard and low to first for a second out. Right then, the wind whipped up from the south and we all had to dig sweatshirts out of our bags. My nephew’s team placed second in the district tournament, thanks to several of my nephew’s runs, and I look forward to watching them play at the state tournament next weekend.

**Exercise 19.3**

Consider a paragraph that you have written recently, whether for school, work, or home. Paste the paragraph here and read it with the same critical eye you used for Exercise 19.1 and Exercise 19.2. Underline your topic sentence, and weigh each subsequent sentence. Do you over-explain or over-think any of your ideas? Is your language clear and straight-forward? Do you adhere to the simple math of the sentence and the paragraph? Are your ideas cohesive, falling neatly beneath a clear topic sentence? What revisions do you need to make, if any?

**Answer Key:**
Answer Key Exercise 19.1

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Answer Key Exercise 19.2

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