

Making Connections between paragraphs

Paragraph Hooks

Although *however* and other transitional devices are indispensable to the writer, enabling him or her to make dozens of connections neatly and efficiently, they can't handle the whole transition load. Even if they could, no writer would depend upon them exclusively, for they can become painfully obvious when they are used over and over again. You want your reader to be pleasantly aware that your paragraphs are firmly linked, but you don't want him or her to see chains too clearly or hear them clank too audibly into place. So you need another kind of transition, something that is both stronger and subtler. You have it in the *paragraph hook*.

You probably use the paragraph hook often in your own writing without knowing it and see it constantly in your reading without realizing it (as in this sentence). But to take full advantage of its possibilities, you should learn to use the paragraph hook consciously, to direct and control it for your own purposes. Control, remember, is the essence of style, and the handling of transitions is an important part of any writer's style.

To see how the paragraph hook differs from the standard transitional device, look first at the example below. Here the transition from one paragraph to the next is accomplished by a **mechanical** transition alone—the word *but*:

Mark Twain is established in the minds of most Americans as a kindle humorist, a gentile and delightful “funny man.” No doubt his photographs have helped promote this image. Everybody is familiar with the Twain face. He looks like every child's ideal grandfather, a dear old white-thatched gentleman who embodies the very spirit of loving-kindness.

But Twain wrote some of the most savage satire ever produced in America.

The **mechanical** transition indicates clearly enough that the writer is preparing to take off with a new idea in opposition to the one in the first paragraph. But the transition is far too abrupt. The leap from one idea (how Twain looked) to the next (how he wrote) is simply too great to be handled by a mechanical transition. Observe how much more firmly the paragraphs hang together if the transition is made like this:

. . . a dear old white-thatched gentleman who embodies the very spirit of *loving-kindness*.

The *loving-kindness* begins to look a little doubtful in view of some of his writing. For Twain wrote some of the most savage satire . . .

Generally speaking, the last sentence of a paragraph is the best place to find the idea for the hook for your new paragraph, for this sentence is the one freshest in the reader's mind. The first sentence of each new paragraph should state your hook.

The above examples are simple **word or phrase hooks**. Another variation of the word or phrase hook is the **idea hook**. The principle is the same; you hook into the

preceding paragraph, but instead of repeating an exact word or phrase, you refer to the idea just expressed, compressing it into a single phrase.

Mark Twain is . . . the very spirit of loving-kindness.

Such a view of Twain would probably have been a source of amusement to the writer himself. For Twain wrote some of the most savage satire . . .

OR

Mark Twain is . . . the very spirit of loving-kindness.

Any resemblance between *this popular portrait* and the man who reveals himself in his writing is purely imaginary. For Twain wrote some of the most savage . . .

In neither of the above examples is an exact word or phrase from the first paragraph repeated. But the hook is clearly there; the referential *such a view* and *this popular portrait* fasten the paragraphs firmly to one another.

The Combinations

The combination of **mechanical transitions** and **paragraph hooks** is so natural that you will probably find yourself using it as a matter of course. Any of the examples provided could be used to demonstrate combination transitions:

The *loving-kindness* begins to look a little doubtful, *however* . . .

Yet this dear old white-thatched gentleman . . .

But to accept such an *image* . . .

Such a view of Twain, *however*, would probably . . .

Whether or not to use a single transition or a combination transition depends partly on your sense of what the reader requires for clarity, and partly upon your own view of the material and your natural rhythm in the writing. If you are certain that you have made yourself perfectly clear with a single transition, let it stand. If you are not certain, or if the rhythm of the sentence seems to need an extra beat, use the combination.

Summary

Remember that the chief purpose of transitions is to help your reader follow your train of thought. Transitions are links that hold your ideas together and keep them moving toward a single goal. So make certain, always, that some kind of link exists in your mind but also, clearly and unmistakably, in the words you put on paper.

One kind of link is not necessarily better than any other kind, but variety is better than sameness, so try for variety. Use the purely **mechanical transitions** for quick and simple transitions. Use **word and phrase hooks** for stronger and clearer links. Use **idea hooks** for broad references. Use **combinations** for emphasis and tone.

Use them all, but, above all, use them.