

Transition by Repetition: Take One Step Back to Go Two Steps Forward

By Kenneth F. Oettle

You will be tempted to believe that because a connection between ideas is perfectly clear to you as a writer, it is also perfectly clear to the reader. It isn't.¹

A Zen proverb says that “a good craftsman leaves no traces.” In good legal writing, the prose moves along so well that the reader never stops to admire the writer's skill. That is the ultimate goal—to focus the reader on the argument, not the writing.

One device that keeps the prose moving and transparent to the reader is the transition, one form of which is the repetition of words from a prior sentence or paragraph. The repeated words are, in effect, a step backward to move two steps forward. Below is an example of words carried from the end of one paragraph to the beginning of the next.

[Last sentence in paragraph:] For all these reasons, the slowdown of *traffic* at *that interchange* constitutes a *safety hazard* and must be alleviated as soon as possible.

[First sentence in new paragraph:] Not only do *traffic* conditions at *that inter-*

change constitute a *safety hazard*, but they increase air pollution as well.

The transition by repetition is in the words *traffic*, *that interchange*, and *safety hazard*.

As suggested by the summarizing phrase *For all these reasons*, the reader beginning the second paragraph probably has a visual, intellectual, and emotional matrix for traffic conditions at the interchange. By restimulating this matrix with the trigger words *traffic*, *that interchange*, and *safety hazard*, the writer can hook the second paragraph into the first. Not only does this achieve continuity—which holds the reader's attention—but it adds emphasis through repetition.

In the example above, the paragraphs are linked not only by the repetition of key words but also by the *Not only...but also* construction, which is used in conjunction with, and intensifies, the repetition of key words. *Not only...but also* is inherently transitional, like *first*, *next*, *in addition*, *for example*, *therefore*, and *thus*.

Let's take a second example. In this one, the second sentence does not flow smoothly from the first:

To gain access to public records under the Right-to-Know Law or the common law, a person must pass through several screens. Standing is required under both

the Right-to-Know Law and the common law.

The paragraph begins by telling the reader that a person needs to pass through several “screens” to gain access to public records. Thus, the reader expects to be told what a person must do (how the person must pass through screens), what the several screens are, or both. In effect, the reader experiences the first sentence as the beginning of a story about a person and about screens, and the reader assumes that the story will continue to be about a person and about screens.

But the second sentence seems to be about something called “standing,” which could be a screen, but the reader does not automatically know that. When the reader sees the word *Standing* at the beginning of the second sentence after not having seen it in the first, the reader may wonder, “Standing. Hmmm. How does ‘standing’ fit in here? It isn't a person. Is it one of the ‘screens’? I thought this story was about persons and screens.”

When neither word appears at the beginning of the second sentence, the reader is momentarily disoriented. Ultimately, the reader will deduce that standing is one of the screens, but at the cost of time and energy.

Readers take transitions for granted until they are omitted; then suddenly the prose is no longer transparent. The reader becomes confused and loses your point.

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In the following versions, the relationship between the two sentences is improved.

[Better:] To gain access to public records under the Right-to-Know Law or the common law, a person must pass through several screens. First, the person seeking disclosure must establish standing.

[Alternative:] To gain access to public records under the Right-to-Know Law or the common law, a person must pass through several screens. One such screen is the requirement that the person establish standing.

In the improved versions, the immediate repetition of the word *person* or *screen* propels the reader from the first sentence into the second by tapping the expectation energy developed around the terms *person* and *screen*.

Readers take transitions for granted until they are omitted; then suddenly the prose is no longer transparent. The reader becomes confused and loses your point. Worse, the reader's confusion, together with his or her resentment at having to work hard to grasp your meaning, may cause the reader to lose faith in you and your presentation. The more this happens, the more the reader will doubt what you say, even to the point of not reading it. In an unfortunate but inexorable progression, serious consequences can flow from an accumulation of small mistakes. ■

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FOOTNOTE

1. Payne, *The Lively Art of Writing: Developing Structure* (Follett Pub Co, 1982), p 99.