Academic Writing that Flows & Resonates

Writing Workshop
Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
UBC Writing Week
May 12, 2015

Alfredo A. Ferreira
UBC Vantage College
UBC Language & Literacy Education Department

Overview

• Workshop talk and tasks using pre-selected texts
  – Map of meanings at stake in academic writing
  – 1: Ensuring information is ordered according to given/new information order
  – 2: Balancing preparing the reader vs getting to the point
  – 3: Balancing explicit and implicit logical reasoning

• Questions and discussion about the Video Tutorial
• Working with your writing and sample texts from your discipline
It is assumed that workshop participants have completed the online writing tutorial

Part 1/3
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETbCf8SWvHW8
Part 2/3
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77RFqX8h6jE
Part 3/3
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kyhdmuOOnY

Writing Academically:
Improving Tone and Flow
by
Packing and Unpacking Ideas

Open Educational Resource
The University of British Columbia
with thanks to UBC Vantage College
Prepared by
Alfredo A. Ferreira
2014
Copyright: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International
See http://creativecommons.org

Meanings (functions) in play in academic writing

What kinds of process, participants, and circumstances are involved?
How are representations logically connected?

What modes are used?
How is info pre/reviewed?
What is given & new info?

What are the roles in the dialogue?
How does writer position writer and readers?
How are claims supported, and how strongly are they made?
EXAMPLE of Connections between functions

The Effects of Climate on Living Things
The term *climate* means average weather pattern of a region over a long period of time.
For example, the climate in northern Canada is very cold, with long, harsh winters and short, cool summers.

**Climate affects the seasonal growth of plants.**
For example, bunchgrasses in BC’s arid Okanagan region look as if they are dead during the hot summer.
In fact, the roots are alive.

**The bunchgrasses begin to grow again as soon as the soil receives some moisture, usually in the fall or early spring.**

---

Levels of Abstraction and Text Organization

The Effects of Climate on Living Things
The term *climate* means average weather pattern of a region over a long period of time.
For example, the climate in northern Canada is very cold, with long, harsh winters and short, cool summers.

**Climate affects the seasonal growth of plants.**
For example, bunchgrasses in BC’s arid Okanagan region look as if they are dead during the hot summer.
In fact, the roots are alive.

**The bunchgrasses begin to grow again as soon as the soil receives some moisture, usually in the fall or early spring.**

---

Basic Consequential Explanation: 2 Stages
(Martin & Rose, 2008)

**Phenomenon Stage**
defines or identifies a phenomenon
(representation focuses on relations, ‘be’; writer positioned as confident knower)

- Topic sentence/*main claim*
- concrete example showing it’s easy to mis-identify the effect of climate on plants
- clarification: appeal to fact
- detailed illustration of effects or consequences of climate

**Explanation Stage**
explains the consequences of the phenomenon (focus on ‘do’ & ‘cause’; negotiated claims)
Given/New Information Order: FLOW

**TASK 1: What is wrong with this version of the climate text?**

Perhaps you agree that the individual sentences are OK, but somehow the sentences do not flow well together. **Why?**

---

**Climate**

- **affects** the seasonal growth of plants.

**For example, looking as if they are dead during the hot summer in BC’s arid Okanagan region**

- **are** bunchgrasses.

**In fact, what is alive**

- **are** the roots.

**What begins to grow again as soon as the soil receives some moisture, usually in the fall or early spring,**

- **are** the bunchgrasses.

---

**Task 1 ANSWER:**

| Given (known) information | New information (begins with **main verb**)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>affects the seasonal growth of plants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For example, looking as if they are dead during the hot summer in BC’s arid Okanagan region</td>
<td>are bunchgrasses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In fact, the roots</td>
<td>are alive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The bunchgrasses</td>
<td>begin to grow again as soon as the soil receives some moisture, usually in the fall or early spring.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Methods paragraph**

[...] From Slogrove et al, 2010

*Pneumocystis jiroveci pneumonia (PCP)* was diagnosed by immunofluorescence microscopy. All infants with PCP were investigated for cytomegalovirus (CMV) infection. Whole blood was assayed for the pp65 antigen and urine was submitted for CMV culture. Blood lymphocyte immunophenotyping for subset enumeration was done on a Becton Dickinson FACSCalibur 4 color flowcytometer with a standard Becton Dickinson MultiTEST reagent panel of monoclonal antibodies (BD Biosciences, Rivonia, South Africa). Permission to publish was obtained from the Committee for Human Research, Stellenbosch University.
When you edit your writing, you may find that some sentences in the paragraphs don’t flow easily. The paragraph may sound disjointed when read.

In this case, check if the initial part in the sentences have been given in a previous part of the text — especially in the News parts.

If there is information that is New to the reader at the start, this may well be the source of the disruption in flow.

Strategy: Move information around in your sentences so that they maintain the structure of Known or Given Information in the subject position and New information in the remainder of the sentence.
Strategies for Improving Flow

1. Swap elements within the clause
2. Switch from active voice (‘they did it’) to passive voice (‘it was done (by them)’)
3. Preview the ideas in the topic sentence

TASKS: Practicing strategies

Strategies for Improving Flow

1. Swap elements within the clause

TASK: Practice strategy #1: Improve the poor flow in the following clause. Why? because the text has been discussing ‘Lenin’s contributions’:

*The Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 would have been very different without Lenin’s contributions.*
PACKING and UNPACKING IDEAS

What is the key difference between sentences 3 and 4 in terms of Given and New information order? 3 is in the Passive Voice; 4 is in the Active Voice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Given/New: (and Logic)</th>
<th>Given</th>
<th>New</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presumes the reader wants to know about causes/factors of plant growth: The effect is treated as Given information and the cause is treated as New information.</td>
<td>How bunchgrasses grow is affected by seasonal changes in moisture.</td>
<td>Presumes the reader wants to know about the effects of climate: The cause is treated as Given information and the effect as New information.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence/Clause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Given</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noun group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Strategies for Improving Flow

2. Switch from active voice (‘they did it’) to passive voice (‘it was done (by them)’)

TASK: Practice strategy #2: Improve the poor flow in the following clause. Why? because the text has been discussing ‘early infrastructure development’:

Convicts built may new bridges, tollgates and miles of new roads throughout colonial Australia.
Strategy #3 for Improving Flow: Preview information

Climate affects the seasonal growth of plants.
For example, bunchgrasses in BC’s arid Okanagan region look as if they are dead during the hot summer.
In fact, the roots are alive.
The bunchgrasses begin to grow again as soon as the soil receives some moisture, usually in the fall or early spring.

Next:
Task to practice strategies for improving flow

---

Handout

Task: Given/NEW information order

Several gaps may be identified in the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA’s) research comparing organically grown and non-organically grown vegetables (FDA 2012).

Residues from fertilizers and pesticides found in non-organically grown vegetables are not considered by the FDA’s study.

The higher quantity of beta-carotene found in the majority of organic vegetables is not reported in the main findings of the study.

The lack of a comparison of the same kinds of vegetables, grown organically and non-organically presents another serious flaw in the study.
Several gaps may be identified in the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA’s) research comparing organically grown and non-organically grown vegetables (FDA 2012).

Residues from fertilizers and pesticides found in non-organically grown vegetables are not considered by the FDA’s study.

The higher quantity of beta-carotene found in the majority of organic vegetables is not reported in the main findings of the study.

The lack of a comparison of the same kinds of vegetables, grown organically and non-organically presents another serious flaw in the study.

Improved

Several gaps are identified in the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA’s) research (FDA, 2014) comparing organically-grown and non-organically grown vegetables.

We note that the study does not consider residues from fertilizers and pesticides in non-organically grown vegetables.

Another issue is that the higher quantity of beta-carotene found in organic vegetables is not reported in the main findings of the study.

The most serious problem is that the study compared different varieties of vegetables, leading us to question the design of the study.
Several gaps are identified in the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA’s) research (FDA, 2014) comparing organically-grown and non-organically grown vegetables.

First, we note that the study does not consider residues from fertilizers and pesticides in non-organically grown vegetables. Then, another issue is that the higher quantity of beta-carotene found in organic vegetables is not reported in the main findings of the study. Finally, the most serious problem is that the study compared different varieties of vegetables, leading us to question the design of the study.

Which of the three sentences (A, B, or C) would work best as a closing sentence for the above paragraph?

• A. It is clear that some problems identified with the study are more serious than others.

• B. This review of the FDA study therefore recommends that readers use caution in interpreting its findings.

• C. Caution in interpreting the findings of the FDA study is therefore recommended to readers.
Our main concern for now is with Topical (ie informational) Themes (ie the subject of the main verb).

To add confidence to your prose, aim begin 50% or more of the sentences with a Topical Theme ie with the subject of the main verb (which is also Given information)

Note: Subjects/theme vary in scope and length
(Peer) Review & Feedback TASK

Read the text for Information Order and Flow:

1. Do clauses begin with known/expected/previous given information? (see before main verb)
2. Do the clauses end with new information, treated as ‘the point’?
3. Is the pattern of information order sufficiently linear (in which previously New info becomes the basis for subsequent Given info)?
4. Are claims sufficiently well previewed (topic sentences) and occasionally reviewed (closing/transition sentences).
5. Do >50% of sentences begin with the subject of the main verb and thus get to the main point of focus quickly?

TOPICS in ACADEMIC WRITING (2)

Information packing
Is there an appropriate balance of concrete and abstract expression in your writing?

Is abstract expression used to
• PREVIEW ideas such as in topic sentences
• REVIEW information in closing and transition sentences
• And for summary, and paraphrasing of citations?
• Introduce technical and abstract terms?
• Compress processes or logical reasoning (but so and) that are already understood?

Is concrete expression used to unpack, clarify etc details?

What is the level of Intricacy of Reasoning (aka grammatical intricacy)?
On average: What is the ratio of clauses to sentences in your writing and the writing in your discipline? Generally, across all sentences, a ratio of 1.4 – 2.2 clauses per sentences ensures a good balance of explicit and implicit reasoning.

How well-balanced are the noun groups?
If your grammatical intricacy and choices of Theme, Given & New are fine and your writing is still not saying what you mean (and you have an idea of what you mean), then there’s a good chance that the problems are in the way your form noun groups.
Shifting registers using “Grammatical Un/Packing”

---

**GRAMMATICAL CATEGORIES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st clause</th>
<th>2nd clause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>noun phrase: subject of 1st clause</td>
<td>noun phrase subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verb</td>
<td>verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adverb phrase / circumstance</td>
<td>conjunction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noun phrase object</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. The children are growing well because they have received medical treatment.

---

**GRAMMATICAL CATEGORIES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st clause</th>
<th>2nd clause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>noun phrase: subject of 1st clause</td>
<td>noun phrase subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verb</td>
<td>verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adverb phrase / circumstance</td>
<td>conjunction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noun phrase object</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Waves** of Concrete and Abstract Expression in Writing

**Shading:** darker shade means greater abstraction of sentence

**Bold font:** words & expressions contributing to abstraction

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>The term <em>climate</em> means <strong>average weather pattern of a region over a long period of time.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii</td>
<td>For example, the <em>climate</em> in northern Canada is very cold, with long, harsh winters and short, cool summers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii</td>
<td><strong>Climate affects</strong> the <strong>seasonal growth of plants.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv</td>
<td>For example, bunchgrasses in BC’s arid Okanagan region look as if they are dead during the hot summer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v</td>
<td>In fact, the roots are alive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vi</td>
<td>The bunchgrasses begin to grow again as soon as the soil receives some <strong>moisture</strong>, usually in the fall or early spring.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Explicit vs Implicit Logical Reasoning

Reasoning within the clause: implicit reasoning using causal verbs, adverbs, nouns etc

Reasoning between clauses: explicit reasoning using conjunctions

**HANDOUT**

Read about how to identify clauses in English

This is necessary to understand and practice variation in the intricacy of reasoning (associated with the variation between speech-like and writing-like language use)

**TASK: Practice Analysis**
Analyze for Intricacy of reasoning
Aim for 1.4 – 2.2 clauses per sentence

Lower IR risks making logical relations hard to identify & track
Higher IR risks making logical reasoning tedious; foregrounds writer’s intervention in the flow of ideas
Calculate intricacy of reasoning

But considering the Japanese experience, this interpretation of the liquidity trap is counter-intuitive. So what is wrong with the Friedman rule? In fact, in this analysis, we assume that prices are perfectly flexible, so food in restaurants and haircut services have their prices changes only infrequently, which means that people will care about changes in prices because it influences what firms decide in terms of demand and production. In this case, monetary policy has a stabilizing role, because it adjusts the level of interest rate. But as I explained before, ZLB creates a lot of trouble for the central bank as it tries to carry this stabilizing role through monetary policy.

This interpretation of the liquidity trap is counter-intuitive in view of the Japanese experience, highlighting the shortcomings of the Friedman rule. Under the assumption of perfectly flexible prices, with infrequent price changes in services such as hospitality and hairdressing, consumer concern about price change influences both demand and production decisions of firms. In this case, however, as noted above, the stabilizing role of central bank monetary policy through interest rate adjustment is seriously hampered by ZLB.
(Peer) Review and Analysis of Writing

Analyze writing for Intricacy of reasoning
Aim for 1.4 – 2.2 clauses per sentence

**Lower IR** risks making logical relations hard to identify and track
**Higher IR** risks making logical reasoning tedious; foregrounds writer’s intervention in the flow of ideas

Strategies for Reducing Intricacy of Reasoning

See Video Tutorial
– Reducing the # of clauses
– Using clause-internal reasoning
– Expanding the role of noun groups
Reducing # of clauses by changing two or more clauses into one clause plus circumstantial information

Eg the shift shown in the table above
“….because they received medical treatment” => “from medical treatment”

Expanding Noun Groups
Expanding noun groups is a good way to reduce Intricacy of Reasoning because many logical relations (that may otherwise connect two clauses with conjunctions) can be realized within the noun group, especially in the head noun and post-modification

| 1 Bottom-heavy | Noun Group: The effects of climate on the seasonal growth of plants that are unpredicted and long-term... |
| 2 Balanced | Noun Group: The unpredicted, long-term effects of climate on the seasonal growth of plants... |
| 3 Top-heavy | Noun Group: The unpredicted, long-term, climatic effects on the seasonal growth of plants... |
Works Cited

Selected References on Systemic Functional Linguistics in Writing

Online Writing Instruction based in Systemic Functional Linguistics
Clearer Writing (good foundation) University of Sydney: http://learningcentre.usyd.edu.au/clearer_writing/

Good Academic Writing Textbook for Grad Students (adopts some SFL)
https://www.press.umich.edu/2173936/academic_writing_for_graduate_students_3rd_edition
A series of 4 little books, including: https://www.press.umich.edu/309338/telling_a_research_story_writing_a_literature_review

Happy researching and writing!