

I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness in the creation of these exercises. Most of the example sentences are my inventions, but some have been picked up over the years from various sources: nursery rhymes, folk songs, newspaper and magazine articles, Mathilda Liberman of the Writing Lab, and former students.

## **Dr. Syntax**

### Improving Your Writing of Arguments

The explanations and exercises found on this Web site are designed to help you acquire a more conscious understanding of both the ways the English language works and the ways arguments work. As you can see, I start with syntax – that is, the idea of relations among units of meaning – to increasingly larger units. It is possible to make us of Dr. Syntax on your own, but ideally you would work with an instructor who could provide further explanation.

[Homepage of Elizabeth A. Dobbs](http://web.grinnell.edu/individuals/dobbs/index.html)  
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## HOME

### 1. SYNTAX: MODELS

#### CLASSES OF WORDS AND FUNCTIONS OF WORDS

#### SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS

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The definitions and examples included here work well enough as general descriptions of English syntax, but we're sure to come across examples of sentences for which they won't quite fit. Not to worry. What we have is at least a rough-and-ready beginning point.

Before we start, however, you need to know that beyond the solitary word, words can also be found in "strings," that is, in phrases or clauses. Both of these "strings" are groups of words that **cohere** in some way. But a clause must, in addition, contain a verb. Further, clauses can be subdivided into independent clauses, which can stand alone, and dependent/subordinate clauses, which can't.

In the definition of each class of word (verb, noun, pronoun, adjective, adverb, verbal, preposition, conjunction), I'll specify first what that class generally expresses or **means** (its semantic content) and then how that class **functions** (its potential syntactic relations).

**Verbs** express ("mean") actions or states of being (**she goes; she is; she becomes**), and, because they predicate something about the subject, they **function** as the "hearts" of clauses.

To define them more precisely, we call them **finite verbs**, because they're **limited** by person (first, second, third), number (singular, plural), and time (past, present, future).

1. The three kinds of finite verbs are:
  - a. **transitive verbs**: they indicate a transfer of the action of the verb to an object; that is they "take" a direct object;
  - b. **intransitive verbs**: their meaning doesn't allow such a transfer, so they don't "take" an object;
  - c. **linking verbs**: these are forms of to be or verbs such as become, seem, feel, etc. that link the subject with a predicate noun or a predicate adjective.
2. Verbs also "agree"/are in concord with their subjects in person and number. **We go. (first person, plural)**

3. Verbs have **voice**: they show whether the subject is the performer (active voice) or the receiver (passive voice) of the action of the verb. **I hit the ball.** vs. **I was hit by the ball.**
4. Verbs have **mood** or mode: they indicate the writer's attitude toward the factuality or likelihood of the actions or conditions expressed. The three modes are
  - a. **indicative**: a declarative statement or question. **I go to my class. Shall I go to my class?**
  - b. **imperative**: a command. **Go to your class.**
  - c. **subjunctive**: a doubt, hypothesis or supposition, possibility or any counterfactual statement. **If he were here, I'd be surprised. Suppose I were to ask you about the subjunctive.**
5. Finally, English verbs can have **aspect**; they can be **progressive**, and thus emphasize the unfolding of the action, or **non-progressive**, a simple statement of the action. **I am going to the store.** vs. **I go to the store.**

**Nouns** name ("mean") persons, places, things, or abstract ideas; they **function** as

1. **subjects**: about which verbs make assertions; see example 1 below;
2. **direct objects**: receivers of the actions of transitive verbs; example 2;
3. **indirect objects**: to/for whom/what something is done; example 2;
4. **objects of prepositions**: **on the table**;
5. **predicate nouns/predicate nominatives**: nouns that occur in the predicate and rename the subject or complete its meaning; used with linking verbs. **Grendel is a monster.**

**Pronouns** replace or substitute for nouns (**he snores**) and therefore mean and **function** as nouns do. They also, however, come in a variety of kinds:

1. **personal**: substitute for a person or thing or a group of persons or things. (**she, they**);
2. **interrogative**: ask a question. (**Who? Why? Where?**);
3. **demonstrative**: point to something or things (**this, those**).
4. **relative**: more about the relative will come up on page 7; for the moment, just recognize these. (**who, which, what, that**).

**Examples of nouns and verbs in action:**

1. Hrothgar snores.

 diagram

 account

2. **Beowulf gives Grendel a surprise.**

 diagram

 account

**Adjectives** denote (“mean”) qualities of the referent of a noun. Their **function**, therefore, is to describe or modify or delimit nouns. In relation to nouns, they answer the question “**which?**”.

**Example:**

3. **Young Hrothgar snores.**

 diagram

 account

An adjective placed in the predicate of a clause and modifying the subject is called a **predicate adjective**. (**Hrothgar is young.**)

**Adverbs** specify (“mean”) locations or times or causes or manner or degree. They **function** as modifiers of verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs, and, in relation to these words, they answer the questions “**where?**” “**when?**” “**why?**” or “**how?**”.

**Example:**

4. **Hrothgar snores loudly.**

 diagram

 account

**Verbals** belong to a class of what you might call “second-string” verbs; a verbal can’t function, as a verb does, as the “heart” of a clause, and it can’t express all that a verb can. For example, it is non-finite with regard to person and number, although it **may** express time.

We categorize verbals based on their **function**. Depending on the category, a verbal can function as a modifier (adjective or adverb), as a noun, or as both. The categories are:

1. **present participle**: functions as an adjective; see examples 7 and 8 below. **N.B.** You will need to distinguish present participles, by themselves, from the progressive forms of verbs.
2. **past participle**: functions as an adjective: **Rolled, the sleeping bag took up little space.**
3. **gerund**: functions as a noun (subject or object). **Rolling is fun.**
4. **Infinitive**: functions as a noun (subject or object), an adjective, or an adverb. **To roll is fun.**

**Examples:**

5. Rolling himself around in bed, Hrothgar snores.

● diagram

● account

6. Running, I caught up.

● diagram

● account

But finally, because verbals are verb-like, they can take objects and have adverbial modifiers. A verbal plus its object and/or modifiers is a **phrase**, for example, a **participial phrase**. Running rapidly on the grass, I caught up.

**N.B.** Two very common mistakes in the use of participial phrases are the **misplaced modifier** and the **dangling modifier**.

In the first, the phrase is "misplaced" next to a noun it isn't meant to modify. (I **lost my hat running down the street**.) The writer can set up the proper relation between the words in these assertions by moving the phrase. (Running down the street, I lost my hat).

Dangling modification, on the other hand, is a more egregious error; properly speaking, there is no actually no modification in this case. (Rushing over the mountain, the Pacific Ocean came into view). This sentence can't be corrected simply by moving the participial phrase because the phrase isn't really modifying anything; it merely dangles. So, dangling modifiers require a more serious restructuring of the sentence. (As the train rushed over the mountain, the Pacific Ocean came into view).

Most often—and you really must pay attention to this—dangling modifiers show up at the ends of sentences. (**Many people wanted to dress as if they were rich, thus supporting the illusion of general prosperity**). Here's one way you could restructure this sentence: **Many people wanted to dress as if they were rich, an action which would support the illusion of general prosperity**. This form of dangling modification is no small potatoes because it destroys relations important in argumentation, such as premise-and-conclusion, data-and-conclusion, or, generally, any inference.

**Prepositions** function to link nouns or pronouns, the so-called **objects** of prepositions, to some other word in a clause or phrase. They express ("mean"), for instance, positional (on) or time relations (after), possession (of), agency (by), and so on.

The entire unit of preposition+object-of-preposition is called the **prepositional phrase** and **functions** as an adverb or an adjective.

**N.B.** Prepositions and conjunctions are like one another in that they both have conjunctive force. That similarity is the reason a few words (e.g. after, before) show up on lists of both prepositions and conjunctions.

**Examples:**

7. Hrothgar snores in bed.

diagram

account

8. Wealhtheow is not a relative of Beowulf.

diagram

account

**Conjunctions** function generally to link, and they express a wide range of meanings from simple addition to some sort of qualification (consequence, time, cause, etc.). But the kind (**coordinating** or **subordinating**) will determine what pieces of language (individual words? phrases? clauses?) a conjunction is capable of linking.

**Coordinating** conjunctions (**and, but, for, or, nor, yet, so**: "fanboys") are the more versatile of the two kinds because some of them can join all three (words, phrases, clauses).

**Subordinating** conjunctions (**when, while, since, after, because, if**, etc.) generally connect a **dependent clause** to another clause. Given the specific conjunction, the **dependent clause** will function as an adverb, an adjective, or a noun. Here are some other subordinating conjunctions.

after*	since*	until*
although	so that	when
as*	than	where
because	that**	whether
if	though	while
in order that	unless	

**\*This word may also function as a preposition.**

**\*\*See C&F: Subordinate Conjunctions, page 49.**

**Examples:**

9. **When he sleeps, Hrothgar snores.**

 diagram       account

10. **Hrothgar knows that Grendel is coming.**

 diagram       account

A special kind of subordinating conjunction is the **relative pronoun**, which we encountered in beginning of *Dr. Syntax* 1. It both joins a dependent clause to another clause and also has a specific syntactic function within the dependent clause. Examples include

who	whose	what
whom	which	that

**Examples:**

I know who you are.      I know whose book this is.

I want to know what you're doing.      I know to whom the book belongs.

This is the book for which I've been hunting.      I know that is true.

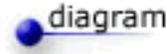
**Conjunctive Adverbs or Adverbial Conjunctions** sometimes confuse writers, because they seem to have a conjunctive function, but are actually **adverbs**. These are words such as therefore, however, and likewise, and they do indeed have some conjunctive force; you'll see later that they can function as transitions within and between sentences. Within sentences, they often establish the thought connection between two independent clauses; however, they aren't syntactically "strong" enough to hold the clauses together, and you have to use a semi-colon to act as the connecting device. Other conjunctive adverbs are:

hence	nevertheless	moreover
consequently	otherwise	indeed
thus	on the other hand	in fact
accordingly	furthermore	in other words
		similarly

**Appositives** are a special case of nouns, so I've left them to last. An appositive can be a word or phrase, but it must rename, explain, or identify another word. **N.B.** It doesn't modify that word. In fact, it has the same function as the first word.

**Example:**

11. **Hrothgar, an old warrior, is besieged by Grendel.**

 diagram

 account

## **CONCLUSION**

Once you've learned the definitions here in *Dr. Syntax 1*, you'll be able to analyze the syntax of an entire sentence. For our work, you will be diagramming sentences (see my handout on diagramming), but I also want you to be able to give an "account" of the **kind** and **function** of words, phrases, and clauses. To analyze syntax, always begin by **locating all the verbs** (don't be deceived by verbals!) and then **determine who or what performs** the action expressed by each verb. If you're looking at a single clause, you will have found the **subject** and what **is predicated** about the subject (the verb), both of which may make up the independent clause, or core structure, of your sentence. Be alert to the possibility of **compound** subjects and verbs: "Jack and Jill"; "went up and fell down."

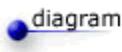
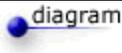
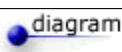
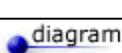
In the following exercises in [Syntactic Analysis](#), you have a chance to develop your skill.

## SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS: EXERCISES

### EXERCISE 1

Do a complete analysis of the structure in each of the following sentences by **diagraming** (making a **graphic display** of the structure) of each. You should be prepared also to give an **account** in class of the kind and function of each word, phrase, or clause. You don't need to identify definite ("the") and indefinite ("a"/"an") articles. In making notes for your account, the following abbreviations are helpful:

- n = noun
- prn = pronoun
- subj = subject
- do = direct object
- io = indirect object
- op = object of preposition
- vb = verb
- pred = predicate
- adj = adjective
- adv = adverb
- prep = preposition
- conj = conjunction
- vbl = verbal (infin, part, ger)
- phr = phrase
- dept cl = dependent clause
- ipt cl = independent clause

1. Little Ms. Muffet sat on the Supreme Court bench.	
2. The grey monkey quickly chased the brown weasel around the mulberry bush.	
3. I am trying to run slowly, because I know that you are not in shape.	
4. When Peter picked a peck of pickled peppers, he was very busy.	

### EXERCISE 2

Do a complete analysis of the structure in the following sentences. Consult the instructions given in Exercise 1. Be sure that you have memorized the definitions of classes and functions of words, phrases, and clauses.

1. After careful consideration of their needs, Jack and Jill went up the hill.

diagram

2. The two looked in the well, when they reached the summit.

diagram

3. For a reason which is not immediately apparent, the children, Jill and Jack, fell down the hill.

diagram

### EXERCISE 3

Do a complete analysis of the structure in the following sentences.

1. Part of the problem in Plato's Meno is that Meno himself has too much "culture."

2. For nearly a decade, the Vietnam War divided our nation in bitterness and violence.

3. The public has a right to know that private gain may be influencing public decisions.

### OPTIONAL EXERCISES

If you don't yet feel confident about your ability to analyze syntax, here are some more sentences, thanks to a former student named Stephen Kern, for practice. Do a complete analysis of structure in each.

1. When Binky tried to touch his toes, he discovered that he couldn't.

2. This year's acid rain was by far the worst.

3. If you don't know the answer, guess.

4. While pondering the world's mysteries, Anaximander ate grapes.

5. Sing a song of sixpence and a pocket full of rye.

6. After the death of Mr. Mangrove, the town mourned for many days.

7. I couldn't help overhearing the terrible news about Igor.

8. Ludmilla and Rowena, two girls from Latvia, went on a long bike ride through the Black Forest.



## 2. KINDS OF SENTENCES AND PUNCTUATION: MODELS AND EXERCISE

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Once you have analyzed the syntactic structure of a sentence, especially its clause structures, you can also identify which of four possible sentence **patterns** the sentence exhibits.\* Below are models of the four kinds. Knowing what sentence pattern you're using can be very **helpful** when you're trying to revise; it's **crucial** in deciding on **punctuation**.

- **Simple Sentence (one independent clause)**

Jack and Jill went up the very steep hill to fetch a large pail of cold water, a dozen eggs, and a cake for their mother's birthday.

**or**

Jack and Jill went up the hill.

- **Compound Sentence (two or more independent clauses)**

Jack went up the hill, and he fell down almost immediately.

**or**

Jack went up the hill; however, he fell down almost immediately.

**or**

Jack went up the hill; he fell down almost immediately.

- **Complex Sentence (an independent clause and a dependent clause)**

After Jack fell down the hill, he felt his head for injuries.

- **Compound-complex Sentence (a combination of the compound and the complex structures)**

After Jack fell down the hill, he felt his head for injuries, but he discovered that he had none.

\*We should also note another group of four sentence patterns: declarative, interrogatory, imperative, and exclamatory. The last three are variations of the first.

**Exercise:** Identify the sentence pattern in each of the following examples and supply proper punctuation. Be prepared **to explain** the reasons for what you've supplied. Diagram 2, 3, 6, 7, and 9.

1. On top of Old Smokey I lost my true lover because he courted too slow.
  
2. Thieves will rob you and take what you have but a false-hearted lover will send you to your grave.
  
3. Never place your affection in a young willow tree.
  
4. When we marched down to Fennario our captain fell in love with a lady like a dove.
  
5. He turned his face to the wall and death was welling in him.
  
6. He cut off the head of his bonny brown bride and flung it against the wall.
  
7. Once I wore my apron high now my apron strings won't tie.
  
8. My watch was new and my money too nevertheless she'd fled with both by morning.
  
9. The teacher says the school board is a fool.

### 3. THE FUNCTION OF WORD ORDER AND PARALLEL STRUCTURE

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Word order **means** in English. That is, one of the important ways we secure meaning in English is by putting words in a certain order. Consider the following sentences.

- The dog chases the cat.
- The cat chases the dog.
- Blowing down the chimney, the wind chilled the girl.
- The wind chilled the girl blowing down the chimney.
- He also longs for great success abroad in the field of dramatic music.
- He longs for great success also abroad in the field of dramatic music.
- He longs for great success abroad also in the field of dramatic music.

You can easily see that each member of a group means differently, but the only difference in each case is a **different word order**. On the other hand, consider these Latin sentences:

- Puer amat puellam.
- Puellam amat puer.
- Puellam puer amat.
- Amat puer puellam.

In each, the order is different, but each means "the boy loves the girl," because Latin is an inflected language and doesn't depend on word order to convey meaning.

### **Parallel Structure: Model and Exercise**

Ideas presented in parallel structures are understood as parallel in importance. For instance, in

- **Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra* is rich in melodies, fresh in invention, lucid in texture**

three ideas of equal importance are placed in the adjective-plus-prepositional phrase structures. Learn to use the powerful structure to your advantage.

**Exercise:** Do these statements mean the same thing? What is parallel in each? Do you see that shifting the parallels radically changes the meaning? Diagram the core structures of both sentences.

Among Dvorak's greatest symphonies, his Seventh Symphony in D Minor holds a special position of being, in content, the darkest and most passionate and shows only a few traces of the composer's folk Czech characteristics.

Among Dvorak's greatest symphonies, his Seventh Symphony in D Minor holds a special position of being, in content, the darkest and most passionate and showing only a few traces of the composer's folk Czech characteristics.

#### 4. TRANSITIONS WITHIN SENTENCES: MODELS AND EXERCISE

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Once again we need to think about **meaning** (semantics) and **function** (syntax) working together. As you saw in *Dr. Syntax 2* with word order and parallel structure, your meaning and the syntax of the words with which you state that meaning cannot be separated. In other words, more often than not, when I give a word, phrase or clause a different specific function, I change meaning. Because the reader of your argument has no choice but to believe you mean what you've written, you must make sure you **do** “mean” your sentences. We'll now focus on some particular meanings conveyed by particular structures. Consider, for instance,

- **Akhilleus continues to argue with Agamemnon looking for the last word.**

This sentence asserts that Agamemnon is the one looking for the last word in the argument. If you mean, however, that Akhilleus looks for the last word, you've mis-structured your sentence. Specifically, you have a misplaced modifier. Since your audience merely reads your words--**it can't read your mind**--this disjunction between form and meaning needs correction. The simplest option is to rearrange the order of the sentence:

- **Looking for the last word, Akhilleus continues to argue with Agamemnon.**

But this **rearrangement** may not make clear the point that you want to make; **restructuring** may be needed. The following models show possibilities for restructuring, each of which has a **different meaning**. The differences, as you will see, are primarily dependent on the different linkages or **transitions** that are set up among the parts of the sentences.

- **Because Akhilleus is looking for the last word, he continues to argue with Agamemnon.**

In this case, you assert a **causal** or **explanatory** relation between the clauses. But what you might really mean is

- **When Akhilleus continues to argue with Agamemnon, he is looking for the last word.**

Here a **temporal** relation between the clauses is asserted. Another possible structure, with an entirely different meaning, is

- **Akhilleus, who argues with Agamemnon, looks for the last word.**

What is **most important** here is the idea that Akhilleus looks for the last word, because that idea is given the structure of an **independent clause**. To reverse the relation of which idea is more important, the sentence could be restructured as

- **Akhilleus, who looks for the last word, argues with Agamemnon.**

or

- **Akhilleus, looking for the last word, argues with Agamemnon.**

With both of these last sentences, the most important idea is that Akhilleus argues with Agamemnon, but, in the last, the idea that Akhilleus wants the last word has been demoted from a **subordinate clause** to a **phrase**.

In sum, the meaning of a sentence **changes** based on the choice of:

- total structure/sentence pattern (*Dr. Syntax 3*) or
- transition word(s) within it (*Dr. Syntax 4*) or
- phrase vs. dependent clause vs. independent clause for particular bits of "information (resulting in increasing emphasis) (*Dr. Syntax 4*).

**Exercise:** Use the sentence, "Blowing down the chimney, the wind chilled the girl" to make a minimum of eight different assertions.

**Explain** in each case, as I do in the model sentences above, what kind of assertion (e.g., temporal, causal) you are making. You might think of these relations in addition to the ones I've already used: "although" (concessive), "as"/"while" (simultaneity), "if" (conditional).

Don't forget that a clause will implicitly confer greater importance on an idea than a phrase will and that word order can be used for emphasis.

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## 5. TOPIC SENTENCE: MODEL AND EXERCISE | WRITING UNIFIED PARAGRAPHS

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The **unity** of a paragraph is determined by and governed by its **topic sentence**, which is almost always the first sentence in it. The topic sentence not only names the **subject** of the paragraph, but also makes an **assertion** about that subject. In a piece of argumentative writing, the topic sentence thus sets out **the main line of argument** the writer will pursue. It almost always also sets out **the specific sub-lines of argument** that will be **developed** in the paragraph in order to support the main line. In other words, it commits the writer to a position that must be proven in the rest of the paragraph. Here's a model from a history text:

Paradoxically an age that described itself in such tones of optimism and confidence also subjected itself to internal criticism of extraordinary severity. Literacy spread, but intellectuals denounced the mass culture it fostered. The arts flourished, but they expressed conflicting values and attitudes that made modern civilization seem lacking in coherence. The standard of living rose, but workingmen formed militant organizations to combat their employers, and socialists considered the very success of capitalism to be evidence of its imminent collapse. Conservatives assailed the threat to civilized values posed by excessive faith in reason, rampant avarice, and purposeless tolerance of every idea and faction. Christians continued to decry materialism and the exclusion of religion from its rightful role. The late nineteenth century is often described as the triumph of the middle class and the age of liberalism, but it was characteristic of that triumph and that age that many were moved to reject it.

**Exercise:** In each of the following paragraphs, taken from "Morals, Religion, and Higher Education" by Robert M. Hutchins, underline the topic sentence. Because Hutchins is doing unusual, but justifiable, things with his topic sentences, don't go on automatic pilot here. You'll see that working with these unusually structured paragraphs is useful, because you'll learn to attend closely to the **thought process** in each and because you'll see some future possibilities for your own writing. **Be prepared to defend your choice of topic sentence.** (I found Hutchins' essay in Edward P.J. Corbett's Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, 2nd ed. [Oxford, 1971], 362-378. Hutchins

delivered an earlier version of the essay in a speech at Kenyon College in 1948.)

### **Paragraph 2**

By the commitments to which I have referred, higher education may directly contribute to the formation of character. The indirect contributions it may make are, perhaps, almost as important. These are the moral by-products of its intellectual work. The life of learning requires the support of the moral virtues; and an arduous academic career must tend to develop those virtues. Without courage or fortitude no one can long stick at the painful task of thinking and studying. Without temperance no one can resist the momentary pleasures and distractions that interfere with study. Without at least some rudimentary sort of prudence no one can allocate his time and plan his work so as to make the most of his academic opportunities. Without justice, which involves a right relation to one's teachers and fellow-students, no one can conduct himself in the academic community in a way that respects the rights of the mind.

### **Paragraph 3**

If the bulk of the instruction is given by lectures, if the duty of the student is to take notes on lectures and to read textbooks, memorizing material to be regurgitated on the examinations given by the teacher who has taught the course, he may develop the habit of memory and the habit of studying the prejudices or curves of those whose favor he hopes to win. The first of these is a good and important habit, though perhaps not the best or most important of the intellectual virtues. The second is a habit valuable to salesmen, advertising men, college presidents, and others who spend their lives trying to get something from other people. But it is a habit into which most Americans seem to fall naturally; they do not need to go to college to get it. The value of the discussion method of instruction, of demanding a great deal of independent work from the student, and of a system of external examinations that requires study of the subject rather than the teacher, is that the habits of action, as well as the habits of thought and knowledge, formed by these means are closely analogous to, if they are not identical with, the four cardinal virtues.

### **Paragraph 4**

An educational institution should be a community. A community must have a common aim, and the common aim of the educational community is the truth. It is not necessary that the members of the educational community agree with one another. It is necessary that they communicate with one another, for the basis of community is communication. In order to communicate with one another, the members of the community must understand one another, and this means that they must have a common language and a common stock of ideas. Any system of education that is based on the training of individual differences is fraudulent in this sense. The primary object of education should be to bring out our common humanity. For though men are different, they are

also the same, and their common humanity, rather than their individual differences, requires development today as at no earlier era in history.

## 6. TRANSITIONS BETWEEN SENTENCES: (MODELS AND EXERCISE | WRITING COHERENT PARAGRAPHS)

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In addition to unity, a paragraph needs **internal coherence**. Coherence can be achieved in several ways; if you're just learning to write arguments, your best method is to use **semantic transitions**. In general, semantic transitions show the **relations** between sentences within a paragraph; they express the "**syntax**" of your paragraph and your thinking. They are not, therefore, merely **useful** because they add "smoothness" or "flow" to your paragraph; rather, they are essential, because they are the way you guide your audience through the steps of your argument. If the reader gets lost, she will not be persuaded.\*

The ways in which you can effect transition are limited, but each way, as with the transitions in *Dr. Syntax 4*, alters the **relation** (a sort of "syntax") between sentences and therefore embodies a **different meaning**. Here are some possibilities:

- example or illustration:
  - Greta had many friends. Siegfried, for instance, was one of them.
- addition:
  - Greta had many friends. She also knew who they were.
- modification of various kinds:
  - Greta had many friends. However, she did not always know who they were.
  - Greta had many friends. But she didn't know who they were.
- specification or moving from the general to the specific:
  - Greta was sure she had many friends. Specifically, she felt confident that Siegfried was one of them.
- conclusion:
  - Greta was surrounded by friends. Therefore, she was very happy.

By skillful use of parallel structure and verbs, good writers can of course **imply** the relations between sentences without using explicit semantic transitions. (See the paragraphs from Hutchins, for instance, in the last exercise.) In the interests of **style**, in fact, a good writer doesn't necessarily want a semantic transition in every sentence and certainly

doesn't want semantic transitions in the same position in every sentence of a paragraph. **Style**, however, is **less important** than content.

But the chances are fairly good that you're not yet a skilled writer of arguments. As a very practical exercise, therefore, I want you for the rest of the semester to supply semantic transitions between all of your sentences in the next to final drafts of your arguments. You'll see that semantic transitions can be a major **tool** in revising.

If you don't have a semantic transition between two sentences in your next to final draft, **how do you find one**? You can come up with the appropriate one by asking yourself "what is the relation between the idea in this sentence and the idea in my last sentence?" That is, you step back from your sentences and account not for the specifics of what two sentences say, but for their general thought relation with one another. Of course, it's possible that you won't be able to come up with a semantic transition.

If you can't, you may have discovered that you've got an irrelevant sentence, a sentence whose structure doesn't accurately reflect what you mean to say, or a sentence which is in the wrong position in the paragraph. In a word, thinking about semantic transitions can be the **key** to discovering--and therefore correcting--any number of problems with your argument.

Once you've got all of the relations clarified, you can then think about style and see which semantic transitions you can eliminate. Where is your writing so clear that the semantic relation can be left implicit? A rule of thumb is that you don't need semantic transitions when your thoughts are continuing in the same direction.

**Exercise:** In each of the four paragraphs of "5. Topic Sentence," underline the semantic transitions in every sentence. These semantic transitions show the **thought relations** between pairs of sentences. In those sentences without explicit semantic transitions, supply ones that properly express the relations between sentences. I want you to focus here on those relations, not on relations between clauses within a single sentence. Set aside those semantic transitions in Fahnestock's chart that can only work internally, for instance, to show relations in complex sentences. We dealt with those transitions in *Dr. Syntax 4*.<sup>\*</sup> In addition to semantic transitions, you might use lexical transitions, although these words express less than do the first. Basically, lexical transitions restate or point to, in a variety of ways (simple repetition, use of synonyms, use of pronouns or demonstrative adjectives), something already stated.



## 7. THE THESIS STATEMENT: DESCRIPTION AND EXERCISE\* | WRITING A UNIFIED ARGUMENT

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The thesis statement of an argument, no matter how long the argument, has the same **relation** to that argument that the topic sentence has to its paragraph. In other words, just as a paragraph has a kind of “syntax,” so does an entire argument. The thesis also **governs** the argument by committing you to a position that you must prove in the argument that follows.\*\*

Because your thesis commits you to a certain argument, you need to be quite sure about what that commitment entails. Specifically, you need to know what **topics** must be dealt with and what **relation(s)** must be proven among those topics. (Inexperienced writers often notice the former and neglect the latter, which is like recognizing that the **subject** of a topic sentence needs to be dealt with, but not that what's **predicated** about the subject also needs to be treated.) For instance, in analyzing the thesis statement Binney and Smith revolutionized the children's art world with the Crayola line, it is not enough to note that the topics of the argument are a) Binney and Smith's Crayola line and b) the children's art world. The thesis proposes a **relation** between the two, that "a" **caused** a specific ("revolutionized") **effect** in "b," which the writer must prove.

As you can see, analyzing the syntax of your thesis statement is one way to discover what it obliges you to prove. You especially want to note the grammatical subject and the predicate. In our example sentence, Binney and Smith is the grammatical subject, and revolutionized the children's art world with the Crayola line the predicate. (This is the moment, by the way, to check that the **grammatical subject** of your thesis is in fact the **topic** about which you mean to write. If your assigned topic is, say, Crayolas, then your sentence is not well structured, because the topic of the argument is, grammatically, in the very subordinate position of object of the preposition.) You can further analyze the predicate into verb and direct object. You now have the complete set of relations: the subject (a) is related to the direct object (b) through the verb (c). Therefore, the nouns (a) and (b) are the topics of your argument, and (c) is the relation you must prove. You can also recognize that, subsidiary to your main argument, your prepositional phrase asserts the **means** by which a and b are related.

Another way to discover at least the relation(s) you must prove is to **look for the transitions** within your thesis or, if there are none, to temporarily restructure that thesis so that you have one. Our example sentence, which is grammatically just fine, has a simple structure and

therefore no transitions, but you could restructure it to make more clear the relations among terms: Because Binney and Smith introduced the Crayola line, the children's art world was revolutionized. You can see now that the relation you have to prove is one of cause and effect. Whether you use the first or second method, what you are doing is determining the **point at issue**, to use an expression that rhetoric long ago borrowed from law, the point on which your argument will turn.

This determination of the relation between terms reveals, as you can see, the **line or lines of argument** you must pursue to prove your thesis. These lines of argument are limited. In brief, they are

- definition: a is b or a is not b;
- relationship:
  - cause and effect: a is the cause of b;
- comparison
  - similarity: a is the same as b;
  - difference: a is not the same as b;
  - degree: a is similar in kind to b, but differs in some degree (more important, more dangerous, less complete, etc.) from b.

See "Discovery of Arguments," "The Topics," in Chapter 2 of Edward P.J. Corbett and Robert J. Connor's Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, 4th edition (Oxford, 1999) for a much more developed discussion of lines of argument.

You may find that you have not only a major line of argument, but also some minor or supporting lines of argument. In, for instance, the thesis, The policy of workfare will never be successful, because it assigns jobs which are dull and demoralizing and which, as a result, create unwilling recipients, the major line of argument is obviously cause and effect (it's also, by the way, an evaluation argument): the independent clause must be shown to be an effect of the dependent adverbial clause structure. But within the dependent adverbial clause, the two dependent adjectival clauses must also be shown to stand in a causal relation to one another. In brief, the topics to be dealt with are policy of workfare, jobs, and recipients.

**Exercise:** First diagram each of the following thesis statements. Then provide a complete analysis of what must be proven. Indicate both the **topics** that must be addressed and the **line(s) of argument**, the relation(s) among those topics.

1. The social, political, and cultural atmosphere of the Impressionist Era had an adverse effect on the reception of the art of the period.

2. The life of Martin Luther King, Jr. serves as a model for all those who strive for civil rights today.

3. The lack of challenge found in many secondary schools can be remedied through different levels of classes and stricter demands on the students.

4. In "Consolations," Linda Pastan's metaphors illustrate the passage of time and the inadequacy of written communication.

5. The two sonnets by John Milton are fundamentally different, despite a remarkable similarity between their religious subjects, in the ways they speak of human activity and existence.

\*All of the thesis statements used in this section are versions of thesis statements former students wrote.

\*\*Obviously, then, the thesis of an argument must be an **arguable statement**; it differs from the thesis of a report or an exposition. For instance, Insurance companies argue that owning small animals increases the expected life span of senior citizens is the thesis statement of a **report** on the findings of the companies, not the thesis statement of an argument. As given, this statement is not arguable. One way to establish whether or not you have an arguable statement is to ask yourself what the opposing argument is.

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## 8. THE OUTLINE: DESCRIPTION AND EXERCISE | WRITING A UNIFIED AND COHERENT ARGUMENT | RELATIONS BETWEEN THESIS AND TOPIC SENTENCE

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As we saw in *Dr. Syntax 7*, an argument **as a whole** has a structure similar to that of a paragraph: its thesis statement is like a paragraph's topic sentence, and each topic sentence functions, just as a paragraph's sentences do within the paragraph, to prove the thesis statement. You achieve internal unity and coherence in an argument, therefore, as you do in a paragraph: by setting up clear **relations**. The argument will be unified if each paragraph, through its topic sentence, is clearly related to the thesis statement; it will be coherent if each of those topic sentences has a clear semantic relation to the previous one. Looking back over our exercises, you can see that all of them stress **relations**; we've built from the syntax of the sentence, to the "syntax" of the paragraph, to the "syntax" of an argument.

When you are revising an argument, you can easily check its unity and coherence by writing the **following kind** of outline of it. First, write out your thesis and, to keep yourself on track, analyze it for the topics with which you must deal and for the relationship(s), **your line(s) of argument**, among those subjects. Write them down. Next, use your actual topic sentences to make an outline of the current form of your argument. That is, the actual topic sentences will be the major parts, indicated by Roman numerals, of the outline; you need not include the proof of each topic, that is, the sentences within a paragraph. The chances are pretty good that when you finish the outline, you'll see that some part or parts don't in fact have an **evident** relation to the thesis or to each other. What you do now depends on what the problem is: you may need to revise your thesis to include the idea contained in a stray topic sentence, or you may need to restructure a topic sentence so that its relation to the thesis statement is clear, or you may need to write an additional topic sentence and paragraph to cover some part of your thesis which you now realize you've omitted, or, worst of all possible cases, you may have to throw out an entire paragraph, because it's irrelevant to what you're trying to argue. But you do end up with a much more effective argument!

**Exercise:** Please type this exercise. Using multi-paragraphed **argument** you have already written for one of your classes, write out your thesis statement, subjects, lines of argument, and make an outline from your topic sentences. Check what you have for unity and coherence. Next, make whatever revisions are necessary for a **hypothetical** new argument and write the outline of that new argument. Turn in the argument you use and both of your outlines

## 9. THE ORDER AND STRUCTURE OF AN ARGUMENT: DESCRIPTIONS AND EXERCISE

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Besides being **unified** and **coherent**, an argument should also be put in the most effective **order**. "Most effective order" very much depends on the particular argument.

In general, judgments about effectiveness have to do with the question of which order is **most persuasive** and are therefore based on matters of clarity, the relative strengths of various points, and your particular audience. For instance, if I have three points or lines (a,b,c) to argue in order to prove my thesis, I should decide which order (a,b,c; a,c,b; b,a,c etc.) would best persuade my reader to accept the validity of my thesis. I might choose the "a,b,c" order because it embodies a logical development that would not be evident in any other order; or I might choose "a,c,b" because my "b" point would be clearer to the reader, and therefore more persuasive, if I've already argued "c"; or I might judge that "c" is the weakest of my points and should be left until the reader has been favorably disposed by the strength of my "b" and "a" points.

Whichever order makes most sense, it ought to be **reflected** in the order of my **thesis statement**. That is, if my thesis statement presents the points in the "a,b,c" order, in my argument these points are best put in an order parallel to that statement.

**Structure** The final matter that we should consider is the **structure** or organization of argument. In a way, the discussion of order has already introduced this topic, because considerations of logic, for instance, may impose a certain structure on an argument. Indeed, the more encompassing category here is structure; one kind of structure is that based upon the most effective order. Such a structure could be represented as having the following paragraphs or, if a complicated or long argument, large units:

- Introduction
  - Thesis statement
- I. Topic "a"
  - Support "a"
- II. Topic "b"
  - Support "b"
- III. Etc.
- Conclusion

But for an argument that takes the form of comparison-contrast, other structures come into play. If A and B represent the things to be compared, such an argument might be structured as

- Introduction
  - Thesis statement
- I. Description of A
- II. Description of B
- III. Comparison-contrast of A and B
- Conclusion

Or it might have this structure:

- Introduction
  - Thesis statement
- I. Comparison-contrast of A and B on point 1
- II. Comparison-contrast of A and B on point 2
- III. Etc.
- Conclusion

The classical argument, in which the counterargument or refutation is important, takes the form

- Introduction
  - Thesis statement
- I. Narration (background information, definitions, etc. necessary to the argument)
- II. Confirmation (proof of the thesis)
- III. Refutation (proof against objections to the thesis)
- Conclusion

**Exercise:** take the first four thesis statements in "7. The Thesis Statement" and outline by topic the most effective order and structure of the argument that would follow each thesis. **Be prepared to defend your decisions.**

## Diagrams & Accounts

### Pronouns

### Diagrams

### Accounts

1		<p>noun - functioning as a subject</p> <p>Hrothgar snores.</p> <p>verb - functioning as a predicate</p>
2		<p>noun - functioning as a subject</p> <p>noun - functioning as an indirect object</p> <p>Beowulf gives Grendel a surprise.</p> <p>verb - functioning as a predicate</p> <p>noun - functioning as a direct object</p> <p>predicate - with the objects completing the sense of the verb</p>

### Adjectives

3		<p>Young Hrothgar snores.</p> <p>adjective - modifying "Hrothgar"</p>
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### Adverbs

4		<p>Hrothgar snores loudly.</p> <p>adverb - modifying "snores"</p>
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### Verbals

5		<p>noun - functioning as an object of the preposition</p> <p>verbal (present participle)</p> <p>pronoun - functioning as an object of the verbal</p> <p>preposition</p> <p>Rolling himself around in bed, Hrothgar snores.</p> <p>adverb - modifying "Rolling"</p> <p>prepositional phrase - functioning as an adverb modifying "Rolling"</p> <p>participial phrase - functioning as an adjective modifying "Hrothgar"</p>
6		<p>Running, I caught up.</p> <p>participle - functioning as an adjective modifying "I"</p>

## Prepositions

7		<p>noun - functioning as an object of preposition</p> <p>preposition</p> <p>Hrothgar snores in bed.</p> <p>prepositional phrase - functioning as an adverb modifying "snores"</p>
8		<p>noun - functioning as an object of preposition</p> <p>preposition</p> <p>Wealthew is not a relative of Beowulf.</p> <p>prepositional phrase - functioning as an adjective modifying "relative"</p>

## Conjunctions

9		<p>verb - functioning as the predicate</p> <p>conjunction</p> <p>When he sleeps, Hrothgar snores.</p> <p>pronoun - functioning as the subject</p> <p>independent clause</p> <p>dependent clause - functioning as an adverb modifying "snores"</p>
10		<p>noun - functioning as the subject</p> <p>conjunction</p> <p>verb</p> <p>Hrothgar knows that Grendel is coming.</p> <p>dependent clause (noun) - functioning as a direct object of the verb</p>

## Appositives

11		<p>Hrothgar, an old warrior, is besieged by Grendel.</p> <p>noun - functioning as an appositive</p>
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## SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS: EXERCISES

### Exercise 1

<p>1. Little Ms. Muffet sat on the Supreme Court bench.</p>	<pre> graph TD     A[Little Ms. Muffett] --- B[sat]     B --- C[on]     B --- D[bench]     C --- E[the]     E --- F[Supreme Court]         </pre>
<p>2. The grey monkey quickly chased the brown weasel around the mulberry bush.</p>	<pre> graph TD     A[The] --- B[monkey]     A --- C[grey]     D[quickly] --- E[chased]     E --- F[around]     E --- G[bush]     H[the] --- I[weasel]     H --- J[brown]     F --- K[the]     K --- L[mulberry]         </pre>
<p>3. I am trying to run slowly, because I know that you are not in shape.</p>	<pre> graph TD     A[I] --- B[am trying]     B --- C[to run]     B --- D[slowly]     B --- E[because]     E --- F[I know]     E --- G[that]     G --- H[you are]     H --- I[not]     H --- J[in shape]         </pre>
<p>4. When Peter picked a peck of pickled peppers, he was very busy.</p>	<pre> graph TD     A[he] --- B[was]     B --- C[busy]     B --- D[very]     B --- E[when]     E --- F[Peter]     E --- G[picked]     E --- H[peck]     H --- I[of]     I --- J[peppers]     J --- K[pickled]         </pre>

### Exercise 2

<p>1. After careful consideration of their needs, Jack and Jill went up the hill.</p>	<pre> graph TD     A[Jack &amp; Jill] --- B[went]     B --- C[up]     B --- D[hill]     C --- E[the]     E --- F[after]     F --- G[consideration]     G --- H[careful]     H --- I[of]     I --- J[needs]     J --- K[their]         </pre>
<p>2. The two looked in the well, when they reached the summit.</p>	<pre> graph TD     A[the] --- B[two]     A --- C[looked]     C --- D[in]     C --- E[well]     D --- F[the]     G[when] --- H[they]     G --- I[reached]     G --- J[summit]     I --- K[the]         </pre>

3. For a reason which is not immediately apparent, the children, Jill and Jack, fell down the hill.

