Improving Global Flow with the Known-New Contract

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Improving Global Flow with the Known-New Contract

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Abstract

Large-scale flow of ideas is the key to effective scientific and argumentative writing. This tutor’s column discusses the Known-New Contract as a teaching tool for global flow. It also discusses the outlining and discussion techniques that can be practically used in appointments with students who struggle with the structure of their papers.

Keywords

Argument, Flow, Global Flow, Known-New Contract, Structure, Tutor’s Column, Writing Center Tutoring
Improving Global Flow with the Known-New Contract

Two of my specialties as a writer and as a writing center tutor are scientific and argumentative writing. Most of my students bring papers in these two fields. Though scientific and argumentative papers differ in purpose and in style, both involve shaping disparate and often specific ideas and details into a cohesive whole and presenting it in an understandable way to an audience that lacks familiarity with the subject matter. Such papers are not effective unless an uninitiated reader can follow the argument and understand how and why the author reached their conclusions.

Sometimes, while reading through a student’s paper in preparation for an appointment, I find myself struggling to follow their line of thought. When I ask myself why, a common answer is: At this point in the essay, I don’t know what I need to know. Sometimes it’s giving the details of a science experiment before the background information. Sometimes it’s delving into an argument without first stating its basic precepts. Sometimes it’s treating an assertion as gospel when it has been neither proven nor defended. In each of these cases, the paper confuses or loses the reader because it lacks global flow.

Discussions of flow often focus on sentence-level readability. However, larger-scale flow of ideas, between sentences, paragraphs, and sections, is just as important. The UNC Writing Center defines this “global flow” as “ideas sequenced logically at higher levels, [so that] readers can move from one major idea to the next without confusing jumps in the writer’s train of thought.” A paper with strong global flow will guide readers through the author’s arguments and findings so it is easy to see how they reached their conclusions. In an argumentative essay or a lab report on a complex and involved experiment, global flow is essential for effective writing.

What can we as writing center tutors do to help our students work on global flow? One step we can take is to understand and teach what the George Mason University writing center calls the Known-New Contract (“Improving Cohesion”). This, in short, is the reader’s expectation that at the beginning of a sentence they will be presented with known ideas, and that those ideas will be connected to something new as the sentence continues. Fulfilling this expectation prevents the reader from having to jump back and forth within a sentence to
understand it, and it applies just as much to sentences in a paragraph and paragraphs within an essay. Readers should be presented with a new idea only after having been given the background and context they need to understand it.

A basic logical structure — such as chronological, claims followed by evidence, or the introduction-methods-results-discussion lab report format — will go a long way towards keeping the reader informed whenever new ideas are introduced. These structures also make it simpler for the student to understand what order of ideas will be most effective. A technique I often use in my tutoring is to work through an outline. If needed, I go a step further by asking the student to verbally state their argument, as if to convince me of it. Very rarely does the weakness in the paper stem from misunderstanding of the ideas within. Usually, students include the needed context or information in spoken explanation, and they require very little prompting to realize what’s missing from the written version. They also have a good sense of where in the paper they should add it in. However, for students that struggle with inserting information or structuring ideas, I ask them to remember the order they explained them to me, and to use it as a starting point. While an off-the-cuff explanation may not be immediately worthy of the final product and require later revision, it is a good place to start on the paper’s large-scale structure.

Global flow of ideas is the key to argumentative and scientific writing. We tutors can help our students improve their writing by teaching them how to effectively structure an argument by moving from known to new and explaining their thoughts naturally. Teaching these things, rather than just fixing flow issues and moving on, helps students improve flow for themselves on future writing projects. This improvement, both of the writing itself and the writers behind it, is the goal of our work, and learning how to teach flow will only make us better at it.
Works Cited

“Flow.” University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center, n.d.

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