Transitions and Connecting Words

The correct use of transitions or connecting words can help create unity. Transition words are also useful in changing the direction of the passage and introducing counterarguments.

*Linking together evidence and conclusions*
- Also
- In addition to
- For example
- Consequently
- Therefore
- Finally
- First, Second, Third
- In the past, at present

*Indicating counter-argument or change of flow*
- But
- On the other hand
- However
- In contrast
- Although
- Despite
- Yet

The following passage illustrates an effective use of transitional phrases and connecting words to facilitate the flow of ideas.

In recent years, psychiatric medicine has made strides in identifying Alzheimer’s disease. Not too long ago, when a physician examined an older patient who seemed out of touch with reality, she had to guess whether that person had Alzheimer’s or was senile, an entirely different syndrome. In the past few years, however, new and more reliable tests have focused on blood chemistry and genetic clues. In the accuracy of these new tests, however, lies the risk of human tragedy of another kind: Physicians may be able to predict Alzheimer’s long before its overt appearance, but such an early and accurate diagnosis could psychologically devastate an otherwise healthy person.1

The author skillfully uses time phrases (‘in recent years,” “not too long ago,” etc.) as well as the transitions “but” and “however” to construct the relationship among ideas. “However” signals a change in the status quo of Alzheimer’s diagnosis, and “but” signals a change from the positive news of early diagnosis to the negative news of the effects that diagnosis might have on someone.

The time phrases and transition words are incredibly important to the intelligibility of the passage. Without them, the passage is choppy and confusing:

The following passage is the previous passage with the transitional devices cut. Psychiatric medicine has made strides in identifying Alzheimer’s disease. When a physician examined an older patient who seemed out of touch with reality, she had to guess whether that person had Alzheimer’s or was senile, an entirely different syndrome. New and more reliable tests have focused on blood chemistry and genetic clues. In the accuracy of these new tests lies the risk of human tragedy of another kind: Physicians may be able to predict Alzheimer’s long before its overt appearance. Such an early and accurate diagnosis could psychologically devastate an otherwise healthy person.

The sentences in this edited version feel disconnected, as if they are not part of the same line of thought. Transitional phrases and words are important because they build bridges for readers between one thought and the next.

**In recent years,** psychiatric medicine has made strides in identifying Alzheimer’s disease. **Not too long ago,** when a physician examined an older patient who seemed out of touch with reality, she had to guess whether that person had Alzheimer’s or was senile, an entirely different syndrome.

In this illustration, the phrase “not too long ago” transitions from the context of things that happened “in recent years” to the way things were before. In American academic writing, don’t force your reader to make those connections for him or herself: Provide transitions and make your writing easy to follow.

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