Unity in Writing

Effective writing depends on more than just the grammatically correct composition of each sentence. The reader must be able to move easily from one sentence to the next. The sentences should therefore express a coherent train of thought. Together, they must constitute a unified whole.

_The following passage lacks unity:_

It has been said that history repeats itself. Who first said this quote is not important. Although circumstances may change, and they frequently do, and the cast of characters will differ, human response to crisis situations remains consistent over time. The lessons gained from past events should affect present decisions. People rarely change their behaviors based upon past experience. Sometimes they do, but not often do they change their actions. Indeed, it sometimes seems as if people are willing to challenge the influence of the past when they repeat mistakes or misjudgments. Why people would want to challenge the influence of the past remains unknown.¹

_A more unified version of the passage follows below._

It has been said that history repeats itself. Although circumstances may change, and the cast of characters will differ, human response to crisis situations remains consistent over time. The lessons gained from past events should affect present decisions, but people rarely change their behaviors based upon past experience. Indeed, it sometimes seems as if people are willing to challenge the influence of the past when they repeat mistakes or misjudgments.²

What has changed? Irrelevant detail and comments have been omitted. The passage stays focused on the notion that no matter what time period, people seem to repeat the mistakes of the past. To achieve unity in writing, eliminate extraneous detail and use only those details that support your point.

Below, take a look at an annotated version of that paragraph:

As you can see, one of the major things to look for is repetition. Other things that help a piece of writing appear more unified is ensuring that sentences are connected well: Joining the third and

² Pennington, Mark. “How to Improve Writing Unity.”
fourth sentences helps connect the ideas and show that the two ideas are part of a single, logical progression of thought, while also creating some sentence variety. Finally, if anything is off topic, simply remove it. Clearly, the topic of the paragraph is not why people repeat past mistakes but that they do, so the last sentence gets removed.

What remains is a much more unified piece of writing, if not a particularly persuasive or rhetorically sophisticated piece of writing. Remember to look for sentences that are repetitive or off topic to remove, and revise some sentences to more clearly link important ideas, and you will make your writing much clearer.

Contact
Want to work on the unity of a piece of your writing? Come work with a tutor at the Writing Center! Drop by or use the information below to contact us and set up an appointment.

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