



Working Toward Cohesion and Thematic Unity:

Some Basic tools

1. Remember the basic rule all good writers know: good writing takes help at the right time from friendly, well informed readers. Cultivate good writing relationships; help others so they'll help you.
2. Some other basic rules: (1) Everybody writes rotten first drafts. (2) Good writing takes time. (3) No one ever stops learning how to write. **Basic message:** leave yourself time to make mistakes, and let yourself make mistakes. It's much easier to revise than to get words down in the first place.
3. Have a "safe" writing space like a personal journal, apart from the document itself, in which you can make messy notes, in your own, personal, "informal" voice. As you draft, use this writing space to make notes about things you need to add (or take out), to make a list of questions for your professor or your informed reader, and to stay focused on what it is you're trying to say. Again and again, remind yourself in writing of your basic purpose and of your audience's expectations. You might find your purpose changing as you write. Let your thinking change as you go.
4. Once you've written a complete draft, leave it alone for a while. Instead, write more notes in your "safe space" about what it is you're trying to do and what words, arguments, data, and so forth you need to fulfill your purpose.
5. Get some sleep; walk the dog; call a friend; eat a cookie; get a massage; get DISTANCE.
6. Once you're ready to revisit your draft, make a "backwards" or "descriptive" outline of it. To do this, carefully look at each paragraph you've written and write down a sentence or two (perhaps in your "safe space") about **what this paragraph basically is doing and saying**. Keep going until you have one or two sentences for each paragraph, arranged in outline-form. Then, looking at your outline, ask these questions about each paragraph:
 - Is there one main topic or idea in most (if not all) paragraphs?
 - Were there any paragraphs you couldn't easily write a sentence about? If so, look at those closely and be very open to revising them.
 - Are any of the paragraphs not serving the basic purpose of the document? Do any fly off on tangents or soften rather than sharpen the document's focus? If so, cut ruthlessly.
 - Does the idea in any particular paragraph need more development, more data, more anything?
 - Is every paragraph logically connected to the ones before and after, and are the connections made clear with explicit transitions?

- Comparing your sentence to the paragraph it describes, do you detect any muddle? Does the paragraph flow smoothly?

Now, looking at the whole outline, see if your organization is clear and sensible. Would a different arrangement serve your purposes better? Should you switch the order of some points to heighten or diminish their impact? Does the arrangement feel balanced, graceful, and effective? And once again, are you saying things you don't need to say, or have you left any key points out.

7. Start revising with a fresh computer screen or a blank sheet of paper. Even if all you do is transcribe much of what you've already written, your mind will be rethinking, redeveloping, reviewing.

8. Finally, once again: know when you need help from an informed reader, like a tutor at the SSU Writing Center. Good times to seek advice include the following:

- when you've lost sight of your key point
- when parts seem muddled to you, but you're not sure they will to others
- when you find you don't really understand what you wish to say
- when you've written so much that you can't "see" the paper anymore
- when you're confused about genre issues: what's this document supposed to look like?
- when you've forgotten particular rules of correctness

9. Repeat steps 4 through 8 as often as you need until you feel confident that you've made the argument you wish to make, that the document presents your case strongly and gracefully, and that you've included exactly the information and words you need to lead your audience to understand you and approach your argument charitably.