Coherence and cohesion

Strands

5.2: Understanding and responding to ideas, viewpoints, themes and purposes in texts as pupils describe the ways ideas are threaded through a text;

8.5: Structuring, organising and presenting texts in a variety of forms on paper and on screen;

9.2: Using grammar accurately and appropriately.

These two aspects ensure texts make sense. Text is from the Latin texere (to weave) so coherence and cohesion ensure a text is woven together into a whole, rather than being an unrelated collection of sentences and/or paragraphs.

Teachers working with pupils learning English as an additional language will need to be explicit in teaching these areas. Pupils who have been learning English for four years or more may give the impression of being fluent, but they still need to develop their skills as readers and writers, especially in formal and/or examination contexts.

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Coherence

A coherent text makes sense because all the parts are clearly related to each other. Coherence is about the choice of content and its organisation.

There are well-established patterns for the organisation of a text and these include moving from the general to the particular, from universals to specifics with the citing of examples. Listed below are some common ways in which writers organise the content of their work; it is not exhaustive but will support you and your pupils in planning texts, through taking account of overall structure, the grammar of texts, in their reading.

Chronological order
This is perhaps the easiest for pupils to deal with. It is obviously a major feature of narrative and recount and will have a part to play in some reports. As pupils’ learning develops, they will be able to manipulate time so that narratives become circular or include parallel elements. The major difficulty for younger pupils is learning how to deal with a month in a sentence and five minutes in several paragraphs. This is about their ability to prioritise events and give them narrative, not temporal weight.

General to particular
Often a feature of reports and discursive writing where general comments are made as an opener: they may set the scene or lay out the argument before moving to particular examples.

Cause and effect
A feature of argumentative and discursive writing where a cause is stated and its effects stated or discussed. There can be no doubt that the climate is changing …

Simple to complex
Perhaps the guidance you give pupils for writing an examination essay: plan the basics in first to get a C grade, then move onto the detail and more complex arguments to get an A*.

External to internal
When moving from the external view or scene setting the internal response or personal view.

Establishing shot to close up
This is a major feature of moving image text where the overview of the scene is established before focusing down to a character, building or face. It is also a feature of texts such as Of Mice and Men which is similarly cinematic in its opening.

Problem and solution
A feature of argumentative and discursive texts where the problem is stated and then possible solutions are discussed. It may conclude with a personal viewpoint.

Question and answer
Similar to the above where a question is asked and solutions offered. It could be something like What can be done about global warming?

Claim and counterclaim
This is an important feature of discursive texts. By the time pupils reach Year 10, they should be able to handle discussion within paragraphs rather than writing, in effect, two essays, one with one viewpoint and the other with the counterclaim.
Cohesion

The term cohesion refers to the language that we use to link and sequence the ideas in a text. It is the language features that hold a text together by showing the reader how different elements relate to each other. Cohesion devices are signposts through a text, enabling us to perceive it as a 'whole' and to follow its developing meaning.

Cohesion devices are grammatical features such as:

- **connectives**: next, meanwhile, lastly, on the other hand;
- **other adverbials which link sentences and paragraphs and usher the reader from one to the next**;
- **pronouns**.

Other features such as visual layout, use of repetition and other patterns can also contribute to cohesion.

Connectives

David Crystal defines connectives as: *a term used in the grammatical classification of words whose function is primarily to link linguistic units at any level.*

*(A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics, David Crystal, Witley Blackwell, 2007)*

They can broadly be classified into two types:

1. **Conjunctions**

   Clauses within sentences are connected by conjunctions and these aid cohesion by making clear the nature of the link between the ideas expressed in the clauses. It is also possible for conjunctions to have a linking role across sentence and even paragraph boundaries.

   Common conjunctions include and, but, when, because, and yet. Section 3 about compound and complex sentences will provide further support.

2. **Adverbials**

   Some adverbials can fulfil the role of making links across sentences and paragraphs. They add to cohesion by making explicit the relationship between different parts of a text and in so doing may function like text. Adverbials that commonly fulfil this role include: nevertheless, consequently, finally, eventually, before, after, next, in spite of, in contrast, for example, as a result, in the beginning, up to that time, on the other hand.

   **Connectives** may be classified in terms of those that:

   - **add**: also, furthermore, moreover, and, for example, especially;
   - **contrast**: however, nevertheless, on the other hand, but, instead, in contrast, looking at it another way, yet, though, at least, in fact;
   - **concede**: although, nevertheless;
   - **reinforce**: besides, anyway, after all;
   - **explain**: for example, in other words;
   - **sequence**: first of all, then, next, finally;
   - **indicate cause and effect**: and so, because, since, so, consequently, as a result, thanks to this, because of this, thus.
time (temporal):
- subsequent time: just then, next, in due course, in the end, since, after that, later, finally, eventually, then;
- prior time: at first, before, in the beginning, until then, up to that time;
- concurrent time: now, in the meantime, simultaneously, concurrently, meanwhile.

Different kinds of text may use a particular connective and the kind of connective used is often a key feature in identifying a particular text type:
- Information texts often use connectives relating to sequence or cause and effect, or for comparison (then, and so, similarly).
- Recount texts use connectives related to time (later, meanwhile, 20 years on); to cause (because, since), or to contrast (although, however, nevertheless).
- Explanatory texts use connectives which indicate sequence (next, gradually), cause and effect (because, so), or comparison (although, in contrast).
- Instructions use connectives relating to chronology (next …, then …, when the joint is secure …).
- In persuasion the connectives are related to the logic (this shows, because, therefore, in fact).
- Discursive writing also uses connectives which relate to logic (as a result, alternatively, however).

Although this is a useful guide, it is clear from the classifications above that some connectives are used in more than one text type. Moreover, words and phrases such as besides, anyway, at least, in that case can be used slightly differently according to the contexts.
Reference

A  Referring back – anaphoric reference

When we speak or write, we often refer to something or someone already mentioned. This makes a connection with earlier parts of the text. We can do this by using:

Personal pronouns (to refer to someone already described):
- subject forms – I, you, he, she, it, we, they;
- object forms – me, him, them;
- possessive forms – my, your, his, hers, mine, yours.

- The whining schoolboy went to school. He hated it.

Aisha found a book; it was mine.

Determiners: another, both, each, every, other, either, neither:
- Two young women went on holiday to Spain. Both enjoyed themselves.

Demonstratives: this/that, these/those:
- The chairman has been awarded a pay rise of £46,000. This is exorbitant.

Certain adjectives: previous, above, former, latter:
- As explained on the previous page…

Certain nouns summarising or referring back to ideas under discussion: situation, issue, problem, attitude:
- The situation you describe does not bode well for the future.

Verbs or verb chains which refer back to an earlier part of the text:
- As has been mentioned already…

References to pieces of writing: chapter, extract, letter, passage, section, table:
- See the example in Chapter 1.

B  Referring forward – cataphoric reference

When we speak or write, we also refer forward to things that are about to be mentioned. This makes a connection between the subject under discussion and what is to come.

We do this by using:

This and these, for example:
- You might not believe this, but I have never been to Germany.

Certain adjectives: following, next, below:
- In the next episode this problem will be resolved.
- When this work is finished, I am going to do the following: take a holiday, dig the garden and repair the drain cover.

In narratives, the writer may often use a pronoun to introduce a character and delay introducing the name: this adds to the suspense and draws the reader in. For example:
- There he was again, staring at her: John, the bane of Susan’s life.
C Reference beyond the text – exophoric reference

Sometimes we refer to people or things beyond the text, assuming that our reader knows about what or to whom we are referring:

- *He had the manners of a pirate.*

Substitution

Some words help create cohesion by standing in for longer phrases already used. This can be done by using so, *not*, one and do/did, for example:

- ‘You are about to show me shadows of the things that have not happened, but will happen in the time before us,’ Scrooge pursued. ‘Is that so, Spirit?’
- *Are you ready? I think so.*
- *I won’t do it again. I hope not.*
- *You’re reading a book about history. I’m reading one about crime.*
- *It rained cats and dogs throughout the holiday. Indeed, it did.*

Ellipsis

Cohesion is strengthened by the avoidance of unnecessary repetition of words. If the writer describes something and introduces a new subject, or provides an answer, then there is no need to repeat the original phrase. You may also want to refer to Ellipsis in Section 3 as further support.

Ellipsis is very common in conversation. We can avoid unnecessary repetition by using:

*have, be and do*, for example:

- *Do we want more teachers?*
- *I think we do!* (want more teachers)

- *Perhaps you’re right.*
- *I know I am.* (right)

- *She may have a temperature.*
- *I am sure she has.* (a temperature)

contrasting tenses, for example:

- *I have never enjoyed knitting. I still don’t.* (enjoy knitting)

question words (usually in conversation):

- *Shall we talk?*
- *Why?* (should we talk)

single words (usually when giving an answer in conversation):

- *What’s your favourite team?*
- *Newcastle.* (Newcastle is my favourite team)
Coherence and cohesion using graphical features

Printed media and electronic media such as websites use a range of features to guide readers through the text. It is hard to define whether they are concerned with coherence or cohesion as they seek to guide the reader through a whole text and its subsections.

Some of these involve:

- **Headlines and sub headlines**
  These grab the reader and provide an at-a-glance guide to content and importance. They often go across the top of a web page with hyperlinks.

- **Bullets**
  Within larger sections these provide an easy way to see subsections and break the text up, to further guide the reader through the text.

- **Underlining**
  This often occurs under headlines or under similar sized print to show importance.

- **Pictures**
  Sometimes these explain or exemplify the text e.g. a photograph of a star in question or they are additional to the text and provide further information e.g. a photograph of a specific flood in a text dealing with floods in general.

- **Hyperlinks**
  These lead out into further websites concerned with similar topics.

- **Font**
  Coherence of font size and type guide the reader through similar topics. Heads and subheads may occur in different fonts or may be emboldened to highlight priority. Italics rather than speech marks are often used for quotations. The connotation of font is important too to give the reader an idea of possible attitude or intended audience. Contrast The Daily Telegraph mast head with the Guardian or the Sun.

- **Colour**
  Font colour can also guide the reader: red could mean important or angry; green and yellow environmentally friendly. Film directors use colour to connote feelings e.g. brown and gold as emotional and perhaps nostalgic; sepia to connote old fashioned; blurring dream sequences.

- **Netiquette**
  The use of block capitals on emails connotes anger as if you are shouting, whereas the use of emoticons guides your reader to your feelings: 😊 connotes happiness, 😞 unhappiness and so on. These will already be familiar to you and your pupils.

All the above strategies guide and influence the reader and support text coherence and cohesion.