

Transitions: The Mark Twain Handout

(this useful handout is no longer common as it once was on the web)

The best guide to transitions is common sense—and a list like the following, which offers a word or phrase that will introduce almost any sentence:

Admittedly	In addition	On the other hand
And	In fact	Still
Assuredly	Indeed	The fact remains
But	It is true that	Therefore
Certainly	Moreover	Thus
Clearly, then	Nevertheless	To be sure
Consequently	No doubt	True
Even so	Nobody denies	Undoubtedly
Furthermore	Obviously	Unquestionably
Yet	Of course	Granted

Although *however* and the other transitional devices listed above are indispensable, enabling the writer to make dozens of connections neatly and efficiently, they can't handle the whole transitional load. Even if they could, no writer would depend upon them exclusively, for they can become painfully obvious when used over and over again. You want your reader to be pleasantly aware that your paragraphs are firmly linked; you don't want your reader to see the chains too clearly or hear them clank too audibly into place.

So you need another kind of transition, something that is both stronger and subtler. You have it in the **paragraph hook**.

To see how the paragraph hook differs from the standard transitional device, look first at the example below. Here the transition from one paragraph to the next is accomplished by a standard transition alone—the word *but*:

Mark Twain is established in the minds of most Americans as a kindly humorist, a gentle and delightful “funnyman.” No doubt his photographs have helped promote this image. Everybody is familiar with the Twain face. He looks like every child's ideal grandfather, a dear old white-thatched gentleman who embodies the very spirit of loving-kindness.

Standard transition: *But* Twain wrote some of the most savage satire ever produced in America...

The standard transition indicates clearly enough that the writer is preparing to take off with a new idea in opposition to the one in the first paragraph. But the transition is far too abrupt. The leap from one idea (how Twain looked) to the next (how he wrote) is simply too great to be handled by a mechanical transition. Observe how much more firmly the paragraphs hang together if the transition is made like this:

Paragraph hook: *The loving-kindness* begins to look a little doubtful in view of some of his writing. For Twain wrote some of the most savage satire ...

Here you see demonstrated the simplest kind of paragraph hook. The last word of the first paragraph is hooked into the first sentence of the second paragraph and used as a point of departure for introducing another idea. This repetition hooks the paragraphs together solidly. The hook need not be one word; it can be a phrase. It should not, however, exceed two or three words.

Although the last word or phrase of a paragraph frequently serves as the simplest and strongest kind of hook, you can go back farther than this, sometimes to even better effect:

Deeper hook: This *dear old white-thatched gentleman* happens to be the author of some of the most savage satire...

Generally speaking, the last sentence of a paragraph is the best place to find the hook for your new paragraph, for this sentence is the one freshest in the reader's mind. If you go back much deeper than this, you will usually need a multiple hook, as in this example:

Still deeper—the multiple hook: To accept such an *image is* to betray greater familiarity with the *photographs* than with the writing. For Twain wrote some of the most savage satire...

Here both *image* and *photographs* are repeated, thus “double hooking” the paragraphs to make up for the greater distance between their first and second appearance. The greater the distance, the more likely you are to need a multiple hook.

All the examples so far have been simple word or phrase hooks. Another variation of the paragraph hook is the *idea hook*. The principle is the same; you hook into the preceding paragraph, but instead of repeating an exact word or phrase you refer to the idea just expressed, compressing it into a single phrase:

Idea hook: *Such a view* of Twain would probably have been a source of high amusement to the author himself. For Twain wrote some of the most savage satire...

Any resemblance between *this popular portrait* and the man who reveals himself in his writing is purely imaginary. For Twain wrote...

In neither of the above examples is an exact word or phrase from the first paragraph repeated. But the hook is clearly there; the referential *such a view* and *this popular portrait* fasten the paragraphs firmly together.

The combination of standard transitions and paragraph hooks is so natural that you will probably find yourself using it as a matter of course.

Combination hook: *The loving-kindness* begins to look a little doubtful, *however*, in view of...
Yet this dear old white-thatched gentleman...
But to accept such an image...
Such a view of Twain, however, would probably...

Remember that the chief purpose of transitions is to help your reader follow your train of thought. They are the links that hold your ideas together and keep them moving toward a single goal. So make certain, always, that some kind of link exists between your paragraphs, and that the link exists not only in your own mind but also, clearly and unmistakably, in the words you put on paper.

One kind of link is not necessarily better than any other kind, but variety is better than sameness. So try for variety. Use the purely mechanical devices for quick and simple transitions. Use word and phrase hooks for stronger and clearer links. Use idea hooks for broad references. Use combinations for emphasis and tone.

Use them all. But above all, use them.