

Achieving “Flow” in Academic Writing

You worked really hard on your paper, but when you got it back, your teacher's comment says that it "doesn't flow." What is "flow," anyway, and how are you supposed to fix it?

"Flow" is a little like Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's definition of pornography: readers know it when they see it, but it's really hard to explain in the abstract. In part, "flow" resists easy definition because it can actually refer to a number of writing problems, each of which can exist alone or in combination with the others.

Below are some writing problems that might interfere with "flow," as well as some suggestions for remedying those problems. If you'd like help implementing any of these ideas in your writing, you can always meet with a Writing Center tutor in person or submit your paper online for an e-tutoring session.

Organization of ideas within the paper as a whole: Readers expect a logical progression of ideas as they proceed through a paper. This progression begins with a strong thesis statement and advances through a careful arrangement of each supporting point. Ask yourself why you chose to organize the evidence in this order. If you had a reason for choosing this organization, try to signal this reason more explicitly so that your readers understand why you are developing your argument in this way; if you answered, "well, I just started writing, and this is what I ended up with," try to reorganize the ideas in a more logical way that builds up to your conclusion. Are there any ideas that don't link back to the thesis, or that seem to go off on a tangent? Either edit those ideas out or try to better incorporate them into the rest of the paper.

Organization of ideas within a paragraph: Readers also expect a logical development of ideas within each paragraph. Use the same techniques as above to think about the way you organized your ideas in each paragraph. Is each paragraph unified around a single idea? Is that idea being communicated in the topic sentence that begins the paragraph? You might need to rearrange or eliminate ideas that seem out of place.

Audience awareness issues: When writers don't have a clear sense of who they are writing to/for, flow problems can crop up because of faulty assumptions about the audience. Writers who assume that readers don't know anything about the topic might include too much background information. The paper doesn't "flow" because it's slow and bogged down with too much overly basic info. Or maybe writers assume that the audience knows what they know, so they don't bother articulating critical connections between ideas because they figure that the reader can easily "connect the dots." To avoid or correct audience awareness problems, figure out who your intended readers are supposed to be. When in doubt, ask your professor which audience assumptions you can validly make.

Transitions: In order for each separate paragraph of a paper to connect and create a unified argument, writers need to consciously link each paragraph to the ones immediately before and after. Ask yourself what the connection is between seemingly unrelated paragraphs. Most of the time, you probably had a clear sense of how you got from A to B, but you may not have made that connection clear on paper.

Awkward sentences/phrasing: Sometimes "flow" can refer to a single sentence when the sentence structure is stilted or confusing. Read your paper (or just your problem sentences) out loud; native speakers will often be able to "hear" that the sentence doesn't make sense, and they can often fix the problem without any additional help. Ask yourself why you chose to write the sentence in this way—if you were trying to "sound smart" by crafting a complex sentence with imposing vocabulary pulled from a thesaurus, you should know that most teachers (and most readers in general) prefer clear, concise sentences over dense, hard-to-follow ones. Trust that your regular voice can best articulate your thoughts, and avoid using unfamiliar words unless they are essential.