
Two Functions of Academic Transitions

Function I: developing one of your ideas

In this handout, when I refer to transitions, I mean primarily the first sentences of each of your paragraphs other than the introduction. These sentences give your reader important guidance about the shape of your argument, and each transition derives its energy from adding a component to your essay. A new paragraph needs a reason to begin, and the reason should come from your ideas, not (or not only) those of the text under discussion. Even if the structure of your paper follows the chronological development of the text, your transitions can keep the reader located in the text *and* in the progress of your own thoughts.

Example 1: plot-based transition

In the next scene, Batman returns to his cave.

Example 2: idea-based transition (based on plot progression in this case)

When Batman returns to his cave, where he has earlier performed the role of student, he now becomes a new kind of teacher.

The second example conveys plot information, but it attaches the plot point to the writer's idea.

However, advancing your own argument with the transition does not exclude using other people's ideas.

Example 3: Idea-based transition with secondary source

When Batman returns to his cave, however, he becomes the kind of "transformative mentor" described by Clevercritic (42).

Here, although drawing on Clevercritic's concept, the writer takes control, linking that concept to the Batman text to place both in the structure of the writer's own argument.

Function 2: establishing the link between the new paragraph and the previous one

Let's return to those three examples:

Example 1: plot-based transition

In the next scene, Batman returns to his cave.

Example 2: idea-based transition (based on plot progression in this case)

When Batman returns to his cave, where he has earlier performed the role of student, he now becomes a new kind of teacher.

Example 3: Idea-based transition with secondary source

When Batman returns to his cave, however, he becomes the kind of “transformative mentor” described by Clevercritic (42).

In fulfilling this function, the transition becomes a transition rather than simply being the opening of a new paragraph. In this sense, example 1 is not a transition: it does not tell the reader how the paper's argument will change from the previous paragraph to the new one. (Instead, it explains something that happens in the plot of the Batman text.)

Examples 2 and 3, however, do explain the connection of the new paragraph to previous parts of the essay. Example 2 refers to Batman's roles of the teacher and student that the paper seems already to have established. Example 3's use of “however” performs a similar function: the new paragraph presumably describes a change in Batman's role from what the paper has already described.

When examples 2 and 3 display the writer's awareness that the new paragraph builds on the paper's established material but adds a new element to the argument, they become effective transitions.