



The Science and Art of Transitions

“I think, therefore I am.” Without “therefore,” this would be a fragment, and if you substituted “however” for “therefore,” the thought of Descartes would be forever changed.

Transitions make all the difference. While that might be an overstatement, cognitive psychologists and psycholinguists have proven what we as legal writers instinctively know: *Transitions* in writing make for better comprehension.

For example, in one experiment, researchers compared reading times for two-sentence pairs with and without transitions:

Transition: The elderly parents toasted their only daughter at the party *because* Jill had finally passed the exams at the prestigious university.

No transition: The elderly parents toasted their only daughter at the party. Jill had finally passed the exams at the prestigious university.

After reading many sentences, the subjects were asked whether a particular word had been present in the statements. In this example, the word was “toasted.” Result? Subjects recalled “toasted” 50 milliseconds faster when “because” was present than when it wasn’t. The scientists concluded that this connection facilitated comprehension and retrieval of the information.

In another study, researchers compared recall times for sentences using the conjunction “because” or “and.” Result? Participants remembered the “because” sentences better than the “and” sentences.

As a legal writing professor and a lawyer, I can tell you that I have come to the same conclusion, albeit not as scientifically. When a writer does not use transitions, or uses the wrong transition, it is hard to follow.

Accordingly, I instruct students about the kinds of transitions:

- Linking transitions
- Repetition transitions
- Restatement transitions
- Roadmap transitions

Linking transitions link one thought to the next, showing a causal relationship between them. They can be used to emphasize a point (*importantly*), note exceptions (*however, although*), conclude or move the discussion forward (*finally, next*), compare points (*similarly, in contrast, for example*), or delineate sequences (*first, second, third*). When delineating sequences, lawyers revel in the “three reasons approach” in both writing

and in oral arguments. There is something magical about three.

It turns out there is some science behind this magic. For example, in one experiment, a woman described her hypothetical boyfriend John as “intelligent, kind, funny, and cute.” At the fourth word, the subjects’ eyebrows and skepticism popped upward.

The subjects concluded that the friend was kidding herself about John. When this same woman described John using only three of the four words, however, the participants concluded that “John is a real catch.”

In contrast, repetition transitions use the same phrase, a similar phrase, or a pronoun. For example, “Jones committed the crime. *The crime (the repetition transition)* consists of elements x, y, and z.”

Similarly, restatement transitions recast the prior thought in a slightly different light and can be designed to summarize a group of similar thoughts into one collective noun. For example, “He swept the floor, washed the dishes, and folded the laundry. These *chores (restatement transition)* bored him.”

Finally, roadmap transitions are used to introduce or preface an idea and alert the reader to a shift in thought. For example, “The State argues that the plaintiff does not have the burden of proof. *This argument, however, is flawed for several reasons (the roadmap transition)*.”

In conclusion, the next time you write a brief or just a letter, don’t forget to use effective transitions to make the connections between your ideas transparent. **RT**

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