

Flow in Academic Writing

One of the greatest challenges in academic writing is to create documents which are ‘easy to read’. Some people say that this is a result of ‘good writing style’; others attribute easy reading to clarity of ideas. In fact, this feeling often comes from what is called ‘smooth flow of ideas’.

Below are two passages which differ in their flow of ideas.

Passage 1:

The basis of our American democracy – equal opportunity for all – is being threatened by college costs that have been rising fast for the last several years. Increases in family income have been significantly outpaced by increases in tuition at our colleges and universities during that period. Only the children of the wealthiest families in our society will be able to afford a college education if this trend continues.

Passage 2:

In the last several years, college costs have been rising so fast that they are now threatening the basis of our American democracy – equal opportunity for all. During that period, tuition has significantly outpaced increases in family income. If this trend continues, a college education will soon be affordable only by the children of the wealthiest families in our society.

The first passage seems choppy, and even disorganized. The second reads much better, and the ideas appear clearer. There are two aspects which attribute to the smooth flow of ideas in the first passage: cohesion and coherence.

Cohesion is a sense of flow, which shows the relationship between sentences, i.e., how easily the reader moves from sentence to sentence.

Coherence is a sense of the whole when all the sentences in a piece of writing add up to create a complete picture.

The Latine verb *cohere* means ‘hold together’. In Writing, Cohesion and Coherence mean easy movement through ideas. They allow the writer to control the smooth flow of ideas and present ideas in a comprehensive way, which reduces readers’ effort.