Signposting Language for Improving Cohesion

“Signposts” are short phrases that writers use to highlight the connections between ideas and sentences.

Functions of Signposting Language

1) They highlight a point.

“The fish-tetrapod transition has been called the greatest step in vertebrate history (Long and Gordon, 2004) and even one of the most significant events in the history of life (Carroll, 2001). Indeed, the morphological, physiological, and behavioral changes necessary for such a transformation in lifestyle to occur are astounding.” (The Evolution of Terrestriality, n.d.)

The writer uses “Indeed” to emphasize how enormous an accomplishment the fish-tetrapod transition was, given all the obstacles to such a change.

2) They introduce something new and situate the new element in the overall discussion.

Another characteristic of impressionism is the use of blurry brush strokes.

The writer uses the phrase “Another characteristic of...is” to introduce another aspect of impressionism. This can be a useful strategy for enumerating parallel points.

3) They continue an argument with a related point.

Graduate students often work multiple jobs. Similarly, undergraduate students may need to work many jobs to pay bills.

“Similarly” indicates a relationship between undergraduate and graduate students.

4) They go into more detail on a point or rephrase.

The graph shows the relationship between the independent and dependent variable. In particular, it shows that they are positively correlated.

“In particular” introduces a statement that provides more detail about the previous statement.

5) They link to a different point.

Having established that climate change is a pressing issue, it is possible to consider the negative ramifications of hydraulic fracturing.

The underlined phrases show that the writer is turning from one point to another.
6) They reintroduce a topic.

Although homosexuality was decriminalized in Thailand prior to decriminalization in the United States, same-sex marriage still hasn’t been legalized by the Thai parliament. Today, tourists consider Thailand one of the most LGBTQ-friendly nations in Asia, as LGBTQ+ nightclubs and LGBTQ+ television shows have experienced a fair amount of success...

...However, as noted above, Thailand has lagged behind the United States in legalizing same-sex marriage.

In the second paragraph, “as noted above” reminds the audience that the writer has already made the point earlier in the paper.

7) They introduce an opposing/alternative view.

Vegetarians often had trouble finding suitable food options in university dining halls. Conversely, meat eaters reported that their dietary needs were satisfied.

The writer uses “Conversely” to indicate that meat eaters had a different experience than vegetarians.

8) They summarize a point.

In summary, the article shows that George Washington suffered from oral pain due to his wooden dentures.

“In summary” signals that the argument is coming to a close.

9) They illustrate the sequence / direction of the argument.

Finally, we will look onto how solar panels will affect the economy in northern Mexico.

Using signposting this way helps readers follow the writer’s logic.

Avoiding Excessive Signposting

Signposts are helpful to readers, but overusing them can make your prose wordy or suggest you don’t trust your reader. Avoid using excessive signposts like those illustrated below.

X “It may be important to note that peanuts are powerful allergens...”

In the above sentence, you may be able to omit this signpost, and can instead utilize the “show don’t tell” method. Furthermore, if your thesis and argument are clear, you shouldn’t need to tell the reader explicitly what is important.

X “What we will be calling attention to in this article...”

This wordy opening is unnecessary. You may instead choose to begin with simply “In this article...”
“As I detailed in the previous paragraph, Thoreau’s motivation for his isolation in Walden was...”

There is no need to remind the reader of something they have just read. They can choose to refer back to the previous paragraph at any time should they need to.

Adapted from Suffern, E. (2019). Effective signposting. The MLA Style Center. style.mla.org/effective-signposting

Additionally, make sure your signpost creates a logical connection between ideas. Using an inaccurate signpost will confuse your readers.

Smoking is bad for you. It can cause lung disease and gum disease. Furthermore, smoking is a great social activity to share among friends.

“Furthermore” indicates that the writer will provide more evidence for why smoking is bad for the reader, but, in the example, the writer instead transitions into why smoking is good for the reader. This application of “Furthermore” is contradictory to its intended use.


Helpful Resources

Academic Phrasebank by Manchester University http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/ provides helpful signposting phrases commonly used in academic writing. Last updated 9/25/2020