

Flow in Scholarly Writing

What do we mean when we say we want writing to “flow”?

When we discuss writing, oftentimes we will say that a particular paragraph or text “flows well” or that it is “choppy” or “disjointed.” But what do we mean when we say that sentences, paragraphs, or whole texts flow—or don’t?

Figuratively, the word “flow” is usually used to describe the movement of liquid, like water. Flowing water is often described as smooth, peaceful, and natural. Another idiomatic phrase “go with the flow,” means to acquiesce, or to give in, to the pace or direction of a given situation. Flow in writing usually refers to how easily a reader can get into the text. That is to say, how easily the reader moves past the text and into a reading experience where she or he is connecting with the ideas presented within the text.

Texts that violate our normal expectations of what a text should do or look like may be distracting, and may, therefore, be “choppy,” “unorganized,” “disjointed,” “confusing,” and tend to simply “not flow well.” When readers are paying more attention to the way a text is written than to the ideas or arguments represented in the text, the more likely they are to miss what the author is trying to communicate.

Sentence-level flow

- Varied sentence structure
- Correct grammar, punctuation, and style conventions (like tense or citations)
- Precision and caliber of vocabulary, especially verbs
- Use of linking and transition words to relate ideas and concepts
- Idiomatic or conversational language in more casual writing
- Direct, concise language in more formal and/or scientific writing

Paragraph-level flow

- Clear organization structure
 - Topic sentence
 - Specific example(s)
 - Explication, details, or analysis
 - Transition sentence at the beginning or end of the paragraph, depending on style conventions
- One clear idea or argument in each paragraph
- Enough support to underpin topic sentence/idea
- Paragraph is long enough that it provides enough support, but short enough not to confuse or bore the reader

Textual-level flow

- Alignment across the text: the title, thesis, and main points match or develop a clear argument
- The introduction provides sufficient background and a clear thesis statement or hypothesis/research questions
- Organization throughout the document supports the argument, either following the standard organization of a publication in the field, or some other recognizable organizational pattern
- The text ends with a conclusion that reviews the main points and/or argument and includes other discipline-appropriate content.