

# English Literature and Composition

## Focus Sheet

### Transitions

**Transitions** are a very important part of your essay. They help your reader understand how the different parts of your argument relate to each other, and help the reader follow your argument from one key point to the next.

You need to consider two types of transitions: those between paragraphs and those within paragraphs. **Transitions between paragraphs** serve to connect your argument when you move from one supporting claim to the next. **Transitions within paragraphs** show how ideas contained in that single paragraph relate to each other. When using transitions, remember that:

- They're not freely interchangeable. Therefore, you must understand the meaning of a transitional word or phrase before using it.
- They may appear at the beginning of paragraphs to show how two paragraphs relate.
- They may appear within paragraphs to show how two sentences relate.
- They may appear at the beginnings of sentences to show how the second sentence relates to the previous sentence.
- They may appear within sentences to show how ideas within the same sentence relate.

Here are some common transitions you can use in your writing, and the relationships they indicate:

- **Additional information:** and\*, also, in addition, moreover, furthermore, similarly
- **Comparison:** by the same token, in the same way, just as, likewise,
- **Concession or qualification:** admittedly, although, even though, granted that, in spite of, naturally, no doubt, of course
- **Contrast:** but\*, however, in contrast, in spite of, nevertheless, notwithstanding, on the other hand, still, yet\*
- **Emphasis or restatement:** chiefly, in effect, in other words, in short, principally, truly
- **Examples:** for example, for instance, in particular, specifically, to illustrate
- **Logical cause:** because, given that, to this end, with this object
- **Logical outcome:** accordingly, as a result, consequently, for this reason, it follows that, so\*, then, therefore, thus
- **Spatial relationship:** above, below, beneath, between, farther away, nearby, on the left (right, top, etc.) opposite
- **Summary or conclusion:** at last, finally, in brief, in conclusion, in short, to summarize, when all is considered
- **Time sequence:** afterward, at last, earlier, at that time, finally, first (second, third, etc.), formerly, immediately, in the meantime, later, meanwhile, next, now, previously, subsequently, then, thereupon

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\*Be careful not to use the words *and*, *but*, *yet*, or *so* at the beginning of a paragraph or sentence. They're coordinating conjunctions and, in formal writing, should only be used within sentences.

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### Top Ten Grammar and Usage Errors

Ideas matter most when you're writing an essay under time constraints. But sloppy or error-filled prose can tarnish even the best ideas. See if focusing on these top ten common grammar and usage errors helps improve your writing.

#### 1. Passive Voice

Voice indicates the relationship between the subject and the action expressed by the verb. If the subject acts, the voice of the verb is active. If the subject is acted on, the voice is passive. The passive is usually made with some form of the verb *to be* (*is, was, is being, have been*) and a past participle (verbs that end in *-ed* or *-ing*).

The active voice is generally more lively, engaging, and conversational. Passive voice can seem weak, evasive, or indecisive. Whenever possible, use the active voice. It'll make your writing much more powerful. For example:

**Active Voice:** *Students use evidence from literary works to prove their thesis statements.*

**Passive Voice:** *Evidence from literary works is used to prove thesis statements.*

#### 2. Biased Language

When writing about specific characters or situations, avoid stereotypical generalizations (positive or negative) relating to gender, religion, race, national origin, and the like.

When making general claims, strive to be gender neutral and avoid using *he, his, or him* to refer to people in general. Rewrite the clunky *he or she* by using the plural form when talking about people in general. For example, use *their* or *students* rather than *he or student*.

**NO:** *Like most males, he uses superior logic to uncover the truth.*

**YES:** *Richmond uses logic to uncover the truth.*

#### 3. Comma Splices

Comma splices result from connecting sentences with commas where other punctuation, a rewrite, or combining sentences is called for. Instead of using a comma to splice together two independent clauses, do one of the following instead:

Use a comma plus *and* (or another conjunction).

Replace the comma with a period or semicolon.

Combine the sentences.

For example:

**NO:** *I like to write, writing is my hobby, finding good topics to write about can be difficult.*

**YES:** *I like writing, which is my hobby. Finding good topics to write about can be difficult.*

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**4. Sentence Fragments**

If a sentence lacks a subject or verb (or both), it's known as a fragment. Repair fragments by making sure each sentence includes both a subject and a verb. For example:

**NO:** The book, which includes more than fifteen dynamic characters.

**YES:** *I read* the book, which includes more than fifteen dynamic characters.

**5. Modifier Problems**

Modifiers describe or limit other words. Modifiers may be single words, phrases, or clauses. Common modification guidelines include:

Place modifiers near words they modify. (In this case, *books* is the word being modified.):

**NO:** All books are *not* literary.

**YES:** *Not* all books are literary.

Strive to keep modifiers from separating the subject and verb:

**NO:** The AP students, *after learning about the assignment*, began reading.

**YES:** *After learning about the assignment*, the AP students began reading.

Avoid dangling modifiers, which don't refer to any word or phrase:

**NO:** *Aiming to complete the book by 7 P.M.*, the novel was read carefully.

**YES:** *Aiming to complete the book by 7 P.M.*, the student read the novel carefully.

Avoid redundant or wordy modifiers:

**NO:** He asked *whether or not* we were going to repeat the *basic fundamentals of writing*.

**YES:** He asked *whether* we were going to repeat the *writing fundamentals*.

Here are some examples of unnecessary modifiers (they're in parentheses):

(final) conclusion  
(main) essentials  
(basic) fundamentals  
attached (together)  
whether (or not)

## 6. Mixed Tense

As standard practice, write about literature in the present tense. For example:

**NO:** When Conrad *discusses* the River Congo, he *used* many references to darkness.

**YES:** When Conrad *discusses* the River Congo, he *uses* many references to darkness.

When describing actions that occurred at the same time, be sure to not mix tenses in the same sentence.

## 7. Subject-verb agreement

Look for the simple subject and check that it agrees in number with the simple verb. In the following example, *[t]he group* is the simple subject. The prepositional phrase *of students* modifies *the group*; prepositional phrases can't be subjects.

**NO:** *The group* of students *were* preparing to write the test.

**YES:** *The group* of students *was* preparing to write the test.

## 8. Lack of parallelism

In any series of items, make sure each item is parallel to the others. In the following example, each of the three items needs a verb form ending in *-ing* to achieve parallelism.

**NO:** Student activities include *viewing* tutorials, *taking* online tests, and *assignments*.

**YES:** Student activities include *viewing* tutorials, *taking* online tests, and *completing* assignments.

## 9. Misused Homonyms and Other Word Sets

Do you know the difference between the words in each set below? You probably do, but if not, read the definitions. Even if you know these words cold, take care in a timed writing situation to make the right choice.

Affect: to influence, pretend (verb); emotion (noun)

Effect: to accomplish, complete (verb); result (noun)

Accept: to receive

Except: to exclude (verb); with the exception of (preposition)

Fewer: use with countable objects; for example, "fewer poems"

Less: use with mass or indivisible things; for example, "less poetry"

It's: contraction meaning "it is"

Its: possessive form of "it"

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There: indicates direction or place; for example, "over there"  
Their: plural possessive pronoun; for example, "That's their book."  
They're: contraction of "they are"

Who: subject pronoun; for example, "Who is reading this poem?"  
Whom: object pronoun; for example, "Whom is the narrator discussing?"

**10. Clichés**

Clichés are overused, worn-out phrases. They come to mind easily yet may confuse or distract your reader.

**NO:** This situation presents the main character with *a can of worms*.

**YES:** This situation presents the main character with *a nasty problem*.

Do you think the main character in the **NO** example above truly sees a can of worms, or is this simply a clichéd expression? For stronger writing, avoid these and other clichés:

*Can of worms*  
*Best-laid plans*  
*Goes without saying*  
*Grind to a halt*  
*Hot pursuit*  
*Ill-fated*  
*In the nick of time*