

## **CLUESS: Clues to Smoother Paragraphs & Essays**

**Bui Duc Tien (M.A.)**

**Department of English, HCMC University of Education**

### ***Abstract***

*Writing in English is a complicated process, which in turns renders the teaching of such a perplexing task. Apart from the attention paid to the content and structure of a paragraph or essay, it is necessary to take heed of CLUESS. Coherence, Language, Unity, Emphasis, Support and Sentences, when carefully reviewed before paper submission, contribute to a well-polished finalized product. The presentation offers practice for audience to quickly grasp the notions.*

- *Coherence refers to the well-connectedness of ideas and the consistency of viewpoints.*
- *Language implies the general style of language, the tone and diction (or word choice).*
- *Unity is the fact that all details and ideas boil down to one central notion, or the state of being 'on the topic'.*
- *Emphasis can be achieved with proper placements of key ideas as well as the effective repetition of such.*
- *Support means how well the topic sentence or the thesis statement is supported by supporting ideas or developmental paragraphs.*
- *Sentence refers to the syntactic variety as well as the use of connective phrases. Sentence errors are also taken into account.*

*A clear understanding and sufficient practice regarding CLUESS will lay a firm foundation for good writing.*

## Introduction

Teaching writing is no piece of cake. From personal experience, it has been avoided, and even loathed by a large number of teachers. Even the simple thought of teaching writing (which implies marking papers) might cause some recoiling bodies. The process of teaching writing *does* involve much complication and it requires much inspiration, aspiration and perspiration of teachers.

During my teaching years at the University of Education (which basically turns out teachers of English), I have witnessed my students perform badly at the skill, despite rigorous training. Their compositions always carry with them some type of errors, small or big. Some things seem to be missing in the program, which prompted my little ‘closer look’ at the whole syllabus.

As I was reviewing the curriculum of the Writing series, which include Writing 1 (for sentences and letters), Writing 2 (for paragraphs), Writing 3 (for essays), and Writing 4 (for research papers), I noticed the limited amount of time (2,5 hours week/ 15 weeks for each course) compared to the amount of knowledge which students were expected to digest. There was basically not enough instruction on the underlying theory of writing, and not enough practice. I could not have a say in the curriculum design for the time being, but I could manipulate the textbook for my own class. I diverted from the appointed materials from the Department and singled out a good ‘bible’ for my students, which is Brandon and Brandon’s (2011) *Paragraphs and Essays with Integrated Readings*. The book had stayed on my e-shelf for a long time, yet I had not paid much attention to it. Now it came out of the blue, and it made the whole thing anew.

What I found in the book was exactly what I needed: clearer instruction on writing, with demonstrations, examples, comments, critical reviews, etc. The book actually focused on two levels: that of passive writing (writing about something you have read), and that of active writing (proposing your own ideas regarding a certain matter). Brandon & Brandon (2011) approached the paragraph and the essay from a highly structural point of view, but what I took the most delight in was the CLUESS, an ultimate guide on writing proficiency.

Now leaving the structural aspect of the paragraph or the essay behind, as well as the contents and ideas, CLUESS lay an emphasis on the ‘umbrella’ that cover all writing. C stands for Coherence, L for Language, U for Unity, E for Emphasis, S for Sentences, and the other S for Support. Each of these constitutes the ‘good’ composition. Failure to ensure each of these renders writing incomplete and awkward. Certainly, teachers (and possibly students) have known these, perhaps from the back of their minds, but to systematize them, and fully comprehend them, and taking advantage of them in their classroom teaching, is probably a different ball game.

In this paper I am, as aforeimplied, not proposing my own ideas about the CLUESS (I did not make up these terms), but will lay a clearest picture possible regarding the explanation and application of such in writing, for the good of the teachers, and for the good of the students.

## Decoding the CLUESS

### *Coherence*

Coherence relates to the connection between ideas: the smoother the connections between ideas, the easier it is for readers to follow your text. In fact, the use of a good *pattern, connective phrases, repetition of key terms and crucial notions, pronouns*, and maintaining a *consistent viewpoint* all contribute to the quality of coherence in a text. As Brandon & Brandon (2011) put it: “You must weave your ideas together so skillfully that the reader can easily see how one idea connects to another and to the central thought” (p. 54).

The use of a clearly laid out general **structure** gives readers a good sense of how they are going to walk through the jungle of words and where to find the way forward, and where the exit is located. The structuring of text depends much on the nature of it: the purpose, the content, and perhaps the audience. Basic patterns include *chronological, spatial*, and *emphatic*, which appear in different types of texts.

The *chronological order* takes pride of place in narrative paragraphs where writers convey their stories over the development of time. What happened in the first place? What happened next? Who appeared? When did the characters start to have a clash? What happened in the end? The time sequence renders narratives easy to follow from the point of view of story readers.

The *spatial relationships* between things often occur in descriptive writing where the writer has to provide a vivid picture of where things are and how they are connected in space, e.g. how far from each other, or A is on which side of B. A description of a favorite room best illustrates this type of order: the writer needs to lead the reader through a visual 3D map using their words in such a way that the reader can visualize himself right on the scene.

The final order, *emphatic*, is one in which ideas are graded according their level of importance. The most emphasized idea comes *first*, then the *second*, then the *third*, then the *last*. This type of order is prevalent among explanatory/ expository, comparative, and argumentative paragraphs where the writer needs to provide a good grounding for any claims they make, together with sufficient support, which includes reasoning, explanations, and examples.

From a structural point of view, each genre of writing by itself has a distinct structure. A letter would have a *greeting*, a *body* and a *closing*, while a paragraph has a *topic sentence*, *supporting sentences* (and a *conclusive sentence*), whereas an essay would have an *introduction*, a *body* and a *conclusion*. These may bear different names in different books, but basically each piece of writing is composed in a certain frame.

A clear pattern is no guarantee of utter comprehensiveness; the use of **transitional terms** also plays a crucial role. As a matter of fact, these serve as concrete signals for the readers’ eyes as they browse the sentences. Conjunctions and conjunctive phrases best serve as transitional terms. With the simple use of *first* for a paragraph, it is much less of a burden for readers to pinpoint the first argument in it. It is also noteworthy that using transitions between ideas and paragraphs actually imply the writer’s deep understanding of what he or she is writing about.

The use of **pronouns** should also be taken into account in the case of coherence. Mundane as they may appear, pronouns are not always fully exploited. The use of pronouns to replace an antecedent prevents unnecessary repetitions and condenses writing. The Vietnamese habit of writing tends to repeat nouns rather than replacing them with pronouns, while the opposite is true for English (except in particular situations). The simple sentence “I tried to buy *tickets* for the concert, but *they* were all sold” (Brandon & Brandon, 2011, p. 55) stands a high chance of being expressed as “I tried to buy tickets for the concert, but tickets were all sold” by a Vietnamese student. The Vietnamese translation “Tôi cố mua vé cho buổi hoà nhạc, nhưng vé bán hết rồi” (which correlates with the noun-repeated version) is more commonly heard amongst Vietnamese than “Tôi cố mua vé cho buổi hoà nhạc, nhưng *chúng* bán hết rồi.” In fact, changing the students’ perception of the relation of nouns in the flow of speech is of extreme importance during the process of teaching them how to write in English.

The use of pronouns not only serve to replace preceding nouns, but also to indicate the **point of view** in writing. Personal experiences are normally conveyed via the use of ‘I’, while ‘you’ appears more in writings where instructions are given. The use of third person singulars ‘he’, ‘she’, or plural ‘they’ are found in more objective writing. Consistency of viewpoint refers to the unchanging use of pronouns throughout the whole paragraph or essay. Many students tend to switch pronouns freely in their compositions, rendering their points of view inconsistent, and therefore reduces coherence in writing.

### **Language**

Language refers to the use of a general style, the tone, and the word diction. Brandon & Brandon (2011) notes the necessity to make use of thesaurus if writing on a computer, but also warns against the impression that two words ‘share precisely the same meaning’ (p. 56).

Language **usage** is most related with the idea of appropriacy, or whether the general language use is proper according to the type of text being written. From a discourse analysis point of view, different text types take on specific language usage. *But this ain’t no problem, ain’t it?* Certainly, the previous sentence does not fit in with the whole paper that you are reading, considering the misplace of ‘but’ at the beginning of a sentence, and the use of ‘ain’t’, which is a slang form of ‘isn’t’. For formal letters, for example, it is advisable to rely on less personal and direct language, so that politeness and formality can be maintained. However, daily written communications, like short notes and Facebook messages, welcome the use of colloquial and ‘loose’ language. It can be deduced, therefore, that usage is grounded in the nature of the audience and the purpose of writing.

Apart from usage, the **tone** of language is also expounded upon in Brandon & Brandon (2011). Tone can be *objective, humorous, angry and sarcastic, servile, or overbearing*. The tone fundamentally transmits the writer’s feeling towards a particular issue or another person. In written language, tone is represented in the choice of word and order.

**Diction**, the last component of language, is word choice. The choice of words reflects appropriacy and the tone of the paper. A letter of application which contains poor diction, e.g. the use of greetings and closings, the use of emotional words, or the use of simple, everyday phrases, certainly does not lend itself very much to the reader.

One noteworthy point is the *overlapping* of usage, tone and diction, as the three actually complements each other. Clarification of each serves the sole purpose of illuminating the subtlety in language used in writing.

### ***Unity***

Brandon & Brandon (2011) reminds: “Do not confuse unity and coherence” (p. 29). In deed, the two terms may sound overlapping, but a close-up photograph reveals discrepancies, major ones in deed. Suppose a student writes about the negative effects of staying up late. His ideas are perfectly connected, well organized in paragraphs, and flawlessly fitted into an explanatory essay frame. He demonstrates utter coherence in his writing, but one problem arises. His ideas go astray. In the first paragraph he discusses the causes of staying up late. The second paragraph focuses on the effects of such nocturnal activity, and the last is reserved for the benefits of getting up early. Transition is smooth, but the whole thing simply slides off the trail. In simple terms, **unity** is the ability to stay on the topic.

### ***Emphasis***

A story with no climax is no story at all. Similarly, any writing without emphasis is no writing at all. Emphasis can be understood as “the focus on the main ideas by stressing what is important” (Brandon & Brandon, 2011, p. 59). The important content in an application letter is the *qualities* of the applicant and why he/she considers him-/herself suitable for the job. The prime idea in an explanatory paragraph on why people prefer to live in the countryside is the *reasons* why they do so. The core of a whole essay is the *thesis* taken by the writer. Emphasis is illustrated in the *placement of ideas* and the *repetition of key terms*.

The introduction and the conclusion of an essay are normally most emphasized, as they leave the deepest impression on readers. Therefore, a statement and restatement of a viewpoint should be done in these two places respectively. As a matter of structure, this renders writing well-built and pulled-together, while simultaneously prevents off-track diversions. In a paragraph, similarly, the key idea is placed in the topic sentence, and can be re-mentioned in the conclusive sentence.

One of the easiest visual way to detect the main idea of any writing is to look at the key words, and how often they are repeated. An essay on smoking would host lots of such key words as ‘smoke’, ‘smoking’, ‘smoker’, ‘passive smoking’, ‘cigarette’, etc. However, clumsy repetitions should be avoided. Brandon & Brandon (2011) noted the following example:

“She looked at him and frowned. He returned the look and then looked away at a stranger looking for his lost keys.”

A better version, in which the word ‘look’ no longer appears so frequently, is also given:

*“She looked at him [or, even, better, She frowned at him]. He glared back and then glanced away at a stranger searching for his lost keys.”*

It is better to think of repetition of key terms from a semantic approach: it is the meaning or a concept that is being repeated, not a certain word or phrase. In this sense, the actual words may vary (in the form of synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, hypernyms, or paraphrases), while the meaning or concept remains.

### ***Support***

Seth McFarlane once humorously remarked (as this is what his job entails) in a Harvard’s commencement speech that: *“In the battle over science vs. religion, science offers credible evidence for all the serious claims it makes. The church says; “Oh, it’s right here in this book!””* The point is, just as for science, writers also need evidence for any of the ‘claims’ they make. In other words, for any argument proposed in an essay, one needs to provide sufficient support. A good paragraph is one where the topic sentence is fully expanded and supported. A good essay has a thesis statement which is fully supported.

Normally, the required amount of support varies, most dependent upon the number of words allowed. However, on a general scale, a topic sentence should be followed by more than one supporting sentence, and each of these supporting sentences should be further explained by at least one sub-supporting idea. A general sense of satisfaction is achieved when no unclarity remains. Support can take the forms of reasoning, explanations, and examples.

### ***Sentences***

Paragraphs and essays are comprised of sentences. A combination of short and long sentences, of *simple, complex* and *compound* sentences, of various sentence patterns, of numerous sentence structures, and of an absence of *fragments* and *run-ons* constitutes *syntactic variety*.

An explanatory paragraph full of simple sentences certainly leaves an unprofessional impression on readers and which in turns questions the intellect of the writer himself. Similarly, a coherent, unified, well-versed essay containing numerous fragmented structures and run-ons (which might not be a common sight) clearly is not pleasant to the reader. Repetitions of structures also damage the credit of the writer seriously. All in all, diversity of sentences is the key to achieve this final S.

## **CLUESS in EFL Classrooms**

The CLUESS seem much complicated when meticulously examined, the mastering of which does not come easily, not to students only, but perhaps to non-native teachers as well. As the Vietnamese language accepts repetitions and does not put so much emphasis on syntactic variety as well as the overall structure, or even the rules regarding the use of cohesive devices, a drastic shift to a different mode of writing seems unnatural and presents tremendous hurdles. When

something huge is to be tackled, however, it is best to break it down into smaller part. CLUESS can be integrated into writing lessons in the form of supplementary (yet obligatory) materials which go hand in hand with mainstream lessons, and each item in the CLUESS acronym should be studied in-depth over the whole period of training.

Theoretical lessons on the CLUESS perhaps will not work magic; it is getting the students to actually see the picture of what the CLUESS is about that counts. As practice makes perfect, 'deep practice' (the term used by Coyle (2009) in *The Talent Code*) of the CLUESS is necessary. 'Deep practice' actually means careful practice combined with reflection and contemplation on the process of doing something, so that the meaning and purpose of the activity appears vivid in the practitioner's mind.

## References

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