



6.3 Cohesion and Coherence¹

Coherence and **cohesion** are two expressions that both refer to stitching a text together and making it clear to your reader how different parts of the text fit together.

Cohesion refers to the many ways that textual elements make connections, for example

- pronouns
- repetitions of words
- contrasting words
- semantic fields
- conjunctions and linking adverbials (e.g. *and*, *but*, *however*, *nonetheless*, *furthermore*, *firstly*, *secondly*, ...)

Coherence refers to how the ideas of a text are tied together. Does the argument have a logic development? Does the conclusion sum up on what is said in the introduction, or does the conclusion discuss something completely different? This is what we in Danish call 'den røde tråd'.

You may have coherence in a text without cohesion as seen in the following example:

Don't believe everything you hear. The earth isn't flat.

There is nothing in the use of words or sentence structure or semantics of these two sentences that tie them together, but we use our real-world knowledge to infer that some people may dispute the earth being round, but science has taught us otherwise. **Coherence** thus relies more on our subjective interpretation of statements in a text, and how we see them in context, whereas **cohesion** relies on more specific and objective elements within the text.

Task 1: Cohesion without coherence

Just like a text can be coherent without being cohesive, a text is completely capable of being **cohesive** without being **coherent**.

Find all the examples of **cohesion** in the following text excerpt.

In about a minute the moon will blow up, unless Peter rides his yellow horse to the next train station where his cousin is waiting to feed his children bread, butter and beans. Firstly, the two of them must check their wallets for any useless credit cards, and secondly the yellow horse must be groomed well.

Why did the text not make sense, despite much **cohesion**?

¹ The definitions of coherence and cohesion in this hand-out are inspired by University of Cambridge, Faculty of English: English Language Online Resource. "Cohesion and Coherence". (<https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/elor/lo/cohesion/index.html>)



Task 2: Finding cohesion and coherence in an analytical essay

Let's turn our attention to how we can use cohesion and coherence ourselves in our writing.

- a. Find all the examples of **cohesion** in the following excerpt from an authentic student essay.

The relationship between the main character Julia and her grandmother is fading. "I should love her, but she's old and never speaks, not like before when I was a child at her knee adrift in her stories" (l. 18-19). As she says in the quote, the present is a contrast to the past when they used to be close. When she was a child, she sat on her knee and listened to her stories, but they have lost that now. She even says that she doesn't love her grandmother.

Nonetheless, she still uses her grandmother to vent to: "And I do talk to her, even though I'm not sure she hears. I tell my grandmother stuff, things I wouldn't tell anyone else, secrets of sorts. Even if she does hear I know that she will not tell, not ever" (l. 36-37). She uses her as sort of a journal, to reflect and to make decisions. However, she could use some of the grandmother's experience. "Too soon, she once said, too soon a bride; I did not know why it was too soon" (l. 15). This quote tells us that the grandmother might have had some valuable advice Julia could have used, and furthermore it highlights that Julia initially was too young to understand the grandmother's message, and now the grandmother is too old to utter that message once again. Even though this is a sad paradox, the act of learning from your own mistakes is thus placed as a central theme of the story.

- b. For each example you have found, identify what the example ties together, e.g. "*She* is a pronoun, referring back to Julia".
- c. Is it always clear which elements are connected? Why/why not?
- d. Look at the coherence of the excerpt: How are ideas of the text tied together?