Transitions in Essays

Countries’ names have been changed to avoid confusion.

The organization of your written work includes two elements: (1) the order in which you have chosen to present the different parts of your discussion or argument, and (2) the relationships you build between these parts. Transitions cannot substitute for good organization, but they can make your organization clearer and easier to follow. Take a look at the following example:

Nicaragua, a Latin American country, has a new democratic government after having been a dictatorship for many years. Assume that you want to argue Nicaragua is not as democratic as the common view would have us believe. One way to effectively organize your argument would be to present the common view and then to provide the reader with your critical response to this view. So, in Paragraph A you would enumerate all the reasons that someone might consider Nicaragua highly democratic, while in Paragraph B you would refute these points. The transition that would establish the logical connection between these two key elements of your argument would indicate to the reader that the information in Paragraph B contradicts the information in Paragraph A. As a result, you might organize your argument, including the transition that links Paragraph A with Paragraph B, in the following manner:

Paragraph A: points that support the view that Nicaragua's new government is very democratic.

Transition: Despite the previous arguments, there are many reasons to think Nicaragua's new government is not as democratic as typically believed.

Paragraph B: points that contradict the view Nicaragua's new government is very democratic.

In this case, the transition words "Despite the previous arguments," suggest the reader should not believe Paragraph A and instead should consider the writer's reasons for viewing Nicaragua's democracy as suspect.

As the example suggests, transitions can help reinforce the underlying logic of your paper's organization by providing the reader with essential information regarding the relationship between your ideas. In this way, transitions act as the glue that binds the components of your argument or discussion into a unified, coherent, and persuasive whole.
Types of transitions

Now that you have a general idea of how to go about developing effective transitions in your writing, let us briefly discuss the types of transitions your writing will use.

The types of transitions available to you are as diverse as the circumstances in which you need to use them. A transition can be a single word, a phrase, a sentence, or an entire paragraph. In each case, it functions the same way: first, the transition either directly summarizes the content of a preceding sentence, paragraph, or section, or it implies that summary. Then it helps the reader anticipate or comprehend the new information that you wish to present.

1. Transitions between sections—Particularly in longer works, it may be necessary to include transitional paragraphs that summarize for the reader the information just covered and specify the relevance of this information to the discussion in the following section.

2. Transitions between paragraphs—If you have done a good job of arranging paragraphs so that the content of one leads logically to the next, the transition will highlight a relationship that already exists by summarizing the previous paragraph and suggesting something of the content of the paragraph that follows. A transition between paragraphs can be a word or two (however, for example, similarly), a phrase, or a sentence. Transitions can be at the end of the first paragraph, at the beginning of the second paragraph, or in both places.

3. Transitions within paragraphs—As with transitions between sections and paragraphs, transitions within paragraphs act as cues by helping readers to anticipate what is coming before they read it. Within paragraphs, transitions tend to be single words or short phrases. Remember: The transition may occur as the last sentence of the paragraph or the first sentence of the next paragraph. Whichever method you choose, your topic sentence would be the next sentence you write.