



Figure 1 The Writing Center and Academic Resource Center logo

**TRANSITIONS 2:
THE OLD/NEW CONTRACT**

What is the old/new contract?

Linguistic theory has suggested that readers understand information more clearly when a sentence begins with information that a reader already knows (old information) and ends with new information. The **old/new contract**



Figure 2 Two small figures and a giant contract

is a method that prevents gaps or confusion in your writing by linking your essay’s older information—something that has been mentioned before in your essay—before presenting new information. This new method of writing is a form of transitioning your sentences so that they can be as clear and easy to understand for your reader as possible.

<p><i>Here is an example of a sentence that presents OLD information before the NEW information.</i></p>	<p>Explanation:</p>
<p>Lately, most movies I have seen have been merely second-rate entertainment, but occasionally there are some with worthwhile themes. One recent movie (<i>old</i>) I saw was about the rapid disappearance of the Indian culture. (<i>new</i>)</p>	<p>This information complies with the old/new contract. In the second sentence, the speaker mentions that they have seen a movie and then mention the content of the movie. Therefore, the speaker opens the second sentence with familiar information and ends the sentence with new information.</p>

<p><i>Here is an example of a sentence that presents NEW information before the OLD information.</i></p>	<p>Explanation:</p>
<p>Lately, most movies I have seen have been merely second-rate entertainment, but occasionally there are some with</p>	<p>This paragraph does not comply with the old/new contract. Since the speaker discusses movies that they have recently seen in the first sentence, it would cause less work for the reader’s mind if the</p>

worthwhile themes. The rapid disappearance of the Indian culture (<i>new</i>) is the topic of a recent movie (<i>old</i>) I saw.	second sentence opened with familiar information. The familiar information is the fact that the speaker has recently seen a movie. Then, the speaker can discuss the content of the movie they've recently seen, which would be new information.
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The Old-Before-New Way:

So why does the second sentence sound clearer than the first? Perhaps it is because your brain was able to register the **OLD**, familiar information before it has to register the **NEW**, unfamiliar information. When a writer does not begin a sentence with **OLD** information, the reader has to hold the **NEW** material in suspension until they have figured out how it connects to what has been mentioned before. In other words, it will take the reader longer to understand the meaning of the sentence. This is because in the Standard English sentence, the topic (or subject) comes before the predicate (the end of the sentence that modifies the subject). **NEW** information that advances the argument should be at the end of the sentence, or in the predicate position. The old/new contract states that the **OLD**, backward-linking material comes at the beginning of a sentence and that the **NEW**, argument-advancing material comes at the end.

How to Make Links to the “Old”:

So, what exactly do we mean by “old” or “familiar” information? We mean everything that the reader has read so far. Any upcoming sentence contains new information, but once the reader has read it, the information becomes old or familiar. There are many strategies for making links to old information, such as...

- **Repeating keywords:** Repeating a keyword from a preceding sentence or an earlier sentence is one of the most common ways to connect your sentences to old information.

In the previous example, make note of the number of sentences that open with “father,” “Father’s,” or “fathering.” By repeating these key terms we can remind the reader about the old information so that they can better understand any new information that we will present (in this case, new information about “fathers”).

For example:

- ✓ “What fathers do—their special parenting style—is not only highly complementary to what mothers do but is by all indications important in its own right.”
 - ✓ “Yet the fathers’ style of play seems to have unusual significance.”
 - ✓ For example, an often-overlooked dimension of fathering is play.
- ***Substituting pronouns for keywords:*** Instead of always using keywords to relate back to old information, you can instead use pronouns, such as “it” or “their.”

In our example, the second sentence opens with the pronoun “it,” which is referring to “research,” and the pronoun “their,” which refers to “fathers.” The last three sentences also open with the pronoun “it,” which is referring to “father’s style of play.” When the reader reads these pronouns, they subconsciously know that they are referring back to the subjects in the old information. Therefore, we are linking back to the old information and creating clarity.

For example:

- ✓ “It shows that in almost all of their interactions with children, father do things a little differently from mothers.”
- ✓ “From their children’s birth through adolescence, fathers tend to emphasize play more than caretaking. This may be troubling to egalitarian feminists, and it would indeed be wise for most fathers to spend more time in caretaking.”
- ✓ “It is likely to be both physically stimulating and exciting. With older children it involves more physical games and teamwork that require the competitive

testing of physical and mental skills. It frequently resembles an apprenticeship or teaching relationship: Come on let me show you how.”

- ***Summarize, rephrase, or restate earlier concepts:*** Writers can link to an earlier sentence by using a word or phrase that summarizes or restates a key concept.

Again, in our example about fathering, the second sentence, “interactions with children,” restates a key concept of childrearing. Finally, note that the pronoun “this” in the second paragraph sums up the main ideas in the previous two sentences.

For example:

- ✓ “It shows that in almost all of their interactions with children, father do things a little differently from mothers.”
- ✓ “This may be troubling to egalitarian feminists, and it would indeed be wise for most fathers to spend more time in caretaking.”

Use a transition word: Writers can also use transition words such as *first . . .*, *second . . .*, *third . . .* or *therefore* or *however* to cue to the reader about the logical relationship between an upcoming sentence and the preceding sentence(s).

The example in the second paragraph opens with “For example,” which indicates that the upcoming paragraph will illustrate a concept identified in the previous paragraph.

For example:

An often-overlooked dimension of fathering is play.”

Exercise:

Read the following paragraph and underline the writing techniques that follow the old/new contract. Are there repeated keywords, pronouns, restatements, and/or transitions?

Another principle for writing coherent essays is the old/new contract. The old/new contract asks writers to begin sentences with something old—something that links to what has gone on before—and then end sentences with new information that advances their argument. This principle creates an effect called coherence, which is closely related to unity. Whereas unity refers to the clear relationship between the body of a paragraph and its topic sentence and between the parts and the whole, coherence refers to the clear relationship between one sentence and the next, between part and part.

For assistance with this exercise, please visit the Writing Center.

This handout is based on the following texts:

Purdue OWL. "Improving Sentence Clarity." The OWL at Purdue. 17 April 2010. Web. 06 January 2011.
< <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/600/01/>>

Ramage, John D., John C. Bean, and June Johnson. The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing. New York: Longman, 2003. Print.

Please visit our website at <http://www.lavc.edu/WCweb/> for additional resources and services.

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