Chapter 5

ARCS OF COHERENCE

HOW TO ENSURE THAT READERS WILL GRASP THE TOPIC, GET THE POINT, KEEP TRACK OF THE PLAYERS, AND SEE HOW ONE IDEA FollowS FROM ANOTHER

So many things can go wrong in a passage of prose. The writing can be bloated, self-conscious, academic; these are habits that classic style, which treats prose as a window onto the world, is designed to break. The passage can be cryptic, abstruse, arcane; these are symptoms of the curse of knowledge. The syntax can be defective, convoluted, ambiguous; these are flaws that can be prevented by an awareness of the treelike nature of a sentence.

This chapter is about yet another thing that can go wrong in writing. Even if every sentence in a text is crisp, lucid, and well formed, a succession of them can feel choppy, disjointed, unfocused—in a word, incoherent. Consider this passage:

The northern United States and Canada are places where herons live and breed. Spending the winter here has its advantages. Great Blue Herons live and breed in most of the northern United States. It’s an advantage for herons to avoid the dangers of migration. Herons head south when the cold weather arrives. The earliest herons to arrive on the breeding grounds have an advantage. The winters are relatively mild in Cape Cod.
The individual sentences are clear enough, and they obviously pertain to a single topic. But the passage is incomprehensible. By the second sentence we're wondering about where here is. The third has us puzzling over whether great blue herons differ from herons in general, and if they do, whether these herons live only in the northern United States, unlike the other herons, who live in Canada as well. The fourth sentence seems to come out of the blue, and the fifth seems to contradict the fourth. The paragraph is then rounded out with two non sequiturs.

Now, I doctored this passage to make it bewilderingly incoherent, just to dramatize the topic of this chapter. But lesser failures of coherence are among the commonest flaws in writing. Consider some of the clumsy sentences I fixed in earlier chapters, repeated here in their improved versions:

The researchers found that in groups with little alcoholism, such as Jews, people actually drink moderate amounts of alcohol, but few of them drink too much and become alcoholics.

For the third time in a decade, a third-rate Serbian military is brutally targeting civilians, but beating it is hardly worth the effort; this view is not based on a lack of understanding of what is occurring on the ground.

Even with the syntax repaired, the sentences are difficult to understand, and the original contexts don't make them any clearer. The problem is coherence: we don't know why one clause follows another. No further tinkering with the syntax will help. We need a context that leads the reader to understand why the writer felt the need to assert what she is now asserting:
As a reader works his way through a text, the next challenge is to keep track of the ideas that run through it and to discern the logical relationship between one idea and the next. Let’s work through a simple text in which the author makes it easy.

My model of coherent discourse is the original version of the text that I doctored for the opening of the chapter. It comes from a weekly feature in a local tabloid, *The Cape Codder*, called “Ask the Bird Folks.” The Bird Folks actually consist of one bird folk, Mike O’Connor, who owns the Bird Watcher’s General Store in Orleans, Massachusetts. Soon after opening the store O’Connor found himself fielding so many questions from curious customers that he tried his hand at writing a column. In this one, he responded to a reader worried about a heron which showed up at a bog near her house and was unable to feed because the bog had frozen over. After reassuring her that herons can survive a few days without eating, he provides the backstory to this pathetic scene:

Great Blue Herons live and breed just about anywhere in the northern United States and most of Canada. When the cold weather arrives, the herons head south. A few come to Cape Cod where the winters usually aren’t too bad. Most of these herons are either inexperienced young birds or lost adult males too stubborn to ask for directions south. Spending the winter here has its advantages, and I’m not talking about the free off-season parking in Provincetown. Herons are able to avoid the dangers of migration, plus they can be one of the earliest to arrive on the breeding grounds.

However, there is a risk with staying this far north. Yes, our winters are often mild and pleasant. Then there is this winter, the winter that never ends. Snow, ice and cold are not kind to birds and I’d bet many herons won’t be booking a visit to Cape Cod next year.

Herons have one thing in their favor; they are excellent hunters and are total opportunists. When the fish are frozen out, they’ll eat other things, including crustaceans, mice, voles and small birds. One hungry heron was seen chowing down a litter of feral kittens. I know, I know, I too was upset to read about the herons eating small birds.

Herons also have one odd behavior that is not in their favor. In the winter they seem to choose and defend a favorite fishing hole. When these areas become frozen solid, some herons don’t seem to catch on and often will stand over a frozen stream for days waiting for the fish to return. Boy, talk about stubborn.

The primary lifeline between an incoming sentence and a reader’s web of knowledge is the topic. The word “topic” in linguistics actually has two meanings. In this chapter we have been looking at the topic of a *discourse* or text, namely the subject matter of a series of connected sentences. In chapter 4 we looked at the topic of a *sentence*, namely what that sentence is about. In most English sentences, the topic is the grammatical subject, though it can also be introduced in a separate phrase, like *As for fruit, I prefer blueberries, or Speaking of ducks, have you heard the one about the man who walked into a bar with a duck on his head?* In that chapter we saw that in a coherent passage the topic of the discourse is aligned with the topic of the sentence. Now let’s see how O’Connor uses this principle over an extended discussion.

The topic of the column is obviously “herons in winter”; that’s what the reader asked about. The point of the column is to explain why a heron might stand over a frozen bog. The topic of the first sentence, namely the subject, is also the topic of the column: “Great Blue Herons live and breed . . .” Imagine that it had begun with something like my doctored version, “Canada is a place where herons live and breed.” It would knock the reader off balance, because he has no reason at this moment to be thinking about Canada.

As the passage proceeds, O’Connor keeps the herons in subject position. Here is a list of the subjects in order, with the ones referring to herons in the left column, the ones referring to something else in the right column, and horizontal lines separating the paragraphs:
Great Blue Herons live the herons head 
A few come 
Most of these herons are 
Herons are able to avoid 
Spending the winter here has 
there is a risk 
our winters are 
there is this winter 
Snow, ice and cold are not kind 

Herons have one thing they are excellent hunters they'll eat 
One hungry heron was seen 
I too was upset 

Herons also have they seem to choose some herons don't seem to catch on [You] talk about 

Putting aside the interjections at the ends of the last two paragraphs, in which the author addresses the reader directly for humorous effect (I know, I know, I too was upset and Talk about stubborn), the subjects (and hence the sentence topics) are remarkably consistent. In the first, third, and fourth paragraphs, every subject but one consists of herons. The consistent string of sentence topics, all related to the column topic, forms a satisfying arc of coherence over the passage.

Better still, the herons are not just any old subjects. They are actors who do things. They migrate, they avoid danger, they hunt, they eat, they stand. That is a hallmark of classic style, or for that matter any good style. It's always easier for a reader to follow a narrative if he can keep his eyes on a protagonist who is moving the plot forward, rather than on a succession of passively affected entities or zombified actions.

It's worth looking at a couple of tricks that allow O'Connor to keep this unblinking focus on his protagonists. He strategically slips in a passive sentence: One hungry heron was seen, as opposed to Birdwatchers saw one hungry heron. Though the heron is merely being observed by an unidentified birdwatcher at this point in the passage, the passive voice keeps it in the reader's spotlight of attention. And O'Connor frequently moves temporal modifiers to the front of the sentence: When the cold weather arrives; When the fish are frozen out; In the winter; When these areas become frozen solid. This preposing avoids the monotony of a long string of similar sentences, even though herons are the grammatical subjects of every one.

Those temporal modifiers all have something to do with cold weather, and that is also a deliberate choice. The new information in each sentence is about how the herons react to cold weather. So in each of these sentences, some aspect of cold weather (mentioned in the modifier at the beginning) sets the stage for an announcement of what herons do about it (mentioned in the main clause that follows). Given always precedes new.

In the second paragraph, cold weather takes its turn on the stage as a topic in its own right. The transition is orderly. The switch of topic is announced in the penultimate sentence of the first paragraph (Spending the winter here has its advantages), and it is maintained consistently in the second, where two of the sentences have cold things as their subjects, and the other two have them in complements to There is, which are like subjects. We have a second arc of coherence spanning the text, which links all the manifestations of cold weather.

The arc linking the sentences about herons and the arc linking the sentences about cold weather are two instances of what Williams calls topic strings: they keep the reader focused on a single topic as he proceeds from sentence to sentence. Let's turn now to another arc of coherence, which connects the different appearances of an entity on the reader's mental stage as they come and go over the course of a passage.

The noun system of English provides a writer with ways to distin-