

Coherence in TOEFL iBT Speaking and Writing

One thing is for sure: If you can organize your TOEFL iBT speaking and writing tasks, you will have a better chance of scoring higher on the TOEFL iBT exam. Achieving a high-scoring organization involves your ability to be coherent or to make sure that your speaking or writing tasks have an overall connectedness within each paragraph and with the entire response. Having paragraph unity and being cohesive are the two main ways that you can be coherent.

Paragraph Unity

During your TOEFL speaking and writing responses, you want to create a unified paragraph by stating a generalization about the topic and following that generalization with relevant supporting details. This generalization is referred to as a topic sentence. To illustrate, consider the following two writing and speaking responses and their accompanying supporting details.

Example Writing Response:

What is the most important characteristic of a co-worker? Use reasons and details to support your opinion.

First of all, being flexible is important because it helps the worker to become a more valuable asset to his supervisor. For example, if the supervisor asks the worker to learn a new excel spreadsheet used to document potential new customers and if the worker adapts to and masters the new computer software, he will become more valuable to the supervisor since he is willing and able to master new job challenges. As a result, the boss may reward the flexible employee by giving him a raise or by promising him continued job security.

In this example, the writer states the generalization of “being flexible” as an important characteristic and provides the specific relevant details about how learning a new spreadsheet will make the worker a more valuable asset to his superior. Lastly, that the topic sentence and the details connect together and directly answer the question being asked results in a unified paragraph.

Example Speaking Response:

What is your favorite type of movie? Why? Use specific reasons and examples to support your opinion.

Romantic comedies relieve job-related stress. The quote, "Laughter is the best medicine." is so true in my life because, even though I work hard as a plumber and have many job-related stresses, I feel less anxiety when I watch romantic comedies. For example, after work one evening last week, I watched the romantic comedy Wedding Planner, which was so funny and romantic that I completely forgot about the worries of my job and concentrated on the funny story of the main characters in the movie who were not supposed to fall in love but did. I laughed a lot during the movie, and, consequently, felt a lot better the next day at work.

The topic of "relieving job-related stress" frames the topic, and the writer provides a quote, mentions his job, and shows how a particular movie helped to reduce the stress in his life, all of which are supporting examples to unify the paragraph.

Cohesion

The second integral part of being coherent is using number of cohesive devices to show how your ideas are connected. Using transition words, determiners, repetition/synonyms, and parallel structures all help to make ideas stick together, which will make your speaking and writing easier to understand. And, you know what that means, don't you? A higher score on your independent and integrated speaking and writing tasks! Let's discuss what each of these cohesive devices are and how you can use them.

Transition Words

One way to make speaking and writing more cohesive is to use transition words which are effective in showing how your ideas are related. The following lists will show you examples of different types of transition words that you can use in your speaking and writing.

Common Transitions of Addition, Examples, Compare, and Contrast			
Addition	Examples	Compare	Contrast
and			but
also			however
besides			on the other hand
further	for example		in contrast
furthermore	for instance	in the same manner	nevertheless
in addition	to illustrate	similarly	still
moreover	in fact	likewise	on the contrary
next	specifically		even though
too			yet
first			although
second			

Common Transitions of Time, Place/Direction, Summary/Conclusion, Logical Relationship/Cause-effect

Time	Place/Direction	Summary/Conclusion	Logical Relationship/Cause-effect
after as before next during later finally meanwhile then when while immediately	above below beyond farther on nearby opposite close to the left	in other words in short in summary in conclusion to sum up that is therefore	if so therefore consequently thus as a result for this reason since

Just as important as using the correct transition word between ideas is the importance of using the correct sentence structure which the transition word requires. Consider the following three types of transition words of contrast and their accompanying sentences:

"But:" *The machine works, but it is damaged.*

"But" is a coordinating conjunction used to join two independent clauses together.

"Although:" *The machine works although it is damaged.*

Although it is damaged, the machine works.

"Although" is a subordinating clause connector used to join an independent clause with a dependent clause. In this sentence, the independent clause (main idea) is "the machine." The dependent clause (support idea) is "it is damaged."

"However:" *The machine works. However, it is damaged.*

The machine works; however, it is damaged.

"However" is used as a transition word to join two separate sentences together.

These examples show that, although the three connectors have the same meaning, they can be grouped grammatically into three categories: coordinators, subordinators, and transition words.

Common Transition Words Grouped Grammatically		
Coordinators	Subordinators	Transition Words
so, and, but, for, or, yet	<p>noun clause connectors:</p> <p>how, how many, if, that, what, when, where, whether, which, who, whom, whose, why</p> <p>adjective clause connectors:</p> <p>that, when, where, whereby, which, whom, whose</p> <p>adverb clause connectors:</p> <p>as, because, inasmuch as, now that, since, if, in case, provided, providing, unless, whether, although, even though, though, whereas, while, in that, where, wherever, as, after, as long as, as soon as, before, by the time, once, since, until, when, whenever, while</p>	<p>Also, as a result, besides, consequently, finally, first, for instance, for example, for this reason, further, furthermore, however, in addition, in the same manner, in other words, in conclusion, in fact, in summary, in contrast, in short, later, likewise, meanwhile, moreover, nevertheless, next, on the other hand, on the contrary, second, similarly, specifically, still, that is, then, therefore, thus, to sum up, to illustrate</p>

Of course, using transition words are not the only way to organize your ideas, but they can be useful when completing integrated speaking and writing tasks. For example, let's say, during a TOEFL iBT integrated task, you read a passage about a notice at a university regarding the shortening of final exam week, and then you listen to two students discuss why they think the notice is unfair. Which transition words will you use to show that the students disagree with the notice? Transition words of "contrast," right?

Or, how about this? During a TOEFL iBT integrated writing task, you read a passage about the theory of cooperative learning, and then the lecture gives a situation where the theory is put into practice in a classroom setting. Which transition words will be effective in combining the information in the lecture with the information in the reading passage? Transition words of "example," right?

So you can see from these two explanations that it is 1) important for you to understand what you read and listen to, and then 2) choose if transition words (and which ones) will be a logical way to express your ideas.

Look at the following example showing how transition words can be used for cohesion.

Example writing prompt:

What are the most important qualities in a neighbor?

The first important quality in a neighbor is considerateness. For example, if my neighbor has a party, he will be sure that the music is not too loud without me having to tell him. Also, if I am on vacation, my neighbor will move my garbage from the street to the side of the house after it has been emptied so that potential thieves will not know that I am on vacation. Therefore, from these two reasons, we can see that being considerate can create a more peaceful and safer community.

To create a coherent paragraph, the writer has an arguable topic sentence and relevant supporting details, and uses transitions to cohesively connect ideas together: "first," "for example," "also," and "therefore."

Determiners and Pronouns

Another way to make ideas cohesive is by using determiners and pronouns. Often referred to as noun markers since they are used to introduce nouns or replace nouns, these types of words are subtle ways to link old information to new, thus making it easier for your audience to understand what you speak and write. Here is a list of pronouns and determiners that are effective in helping to make your speaking and writing cohesive.

Subject Pronouns	Object Pronouns	Possessive Pronouns	Reflexive Pronouns	Demonstrative Pronouns	Possessive Determiners	Demonstrative Determiners
I	me	mine	myself	this	my	this
you	you	yours	yourself	that	your	that
he	him	his	himself	these	his	these
she	her	hers	herself	those	her	those
it	it		itself		its	
we	us	ours	ourselves		our	
you	you	yours	yourselves		your	
they	them	theirs	themselves		their	

*Pronouns are used to replace nouns: *The man is looking to replace his car. He said that it is not working properly anymore.* In this example, "he" and "it" are used to replace nouns "man" and "car."

*Determiners are used to introduce nouns: *John's car is not parked in his garage right now.* Unlike the previous example, "John's" and "his" are used to introduce, not replace, nouns "car" and "garage."

Example speaking prompt:

How does the information in the listening passage support the information in the reading passage?

The information in the listening passage contradicts the information presented in the reading passage. Even though learners may learn through imitation, as the reading passage suggests, the lecture contends that not all learning occurs by imitation. In fact, it is argued that most learning occurs when speakers are actively engaged in the construction of their own rules as they apply them to the target language.

To create a cohesive paragraph, the writer uses a number of determiners and pronouns: "the," "it," "their," "they," and "them."

Repetition/Rephrase

A third way you can connect your writing and speaking is by repeating or rephrasing key words. This type of cohesion can be particularly effective when used in the key words of the topic sentences. For example, when making a response to a writing or speaking task, you will need to create a topic or thesis statement which introduces two or three key points that you want to discuss. Since the purpose of your body paragraphs is to develop each of these key points, you can refer to the key points in your topic sentences by either using the same word or a synonym of the word.

Example writing prompt:

*What are the **most important qualities** of a good **roommate**? Use specific reasons examples to support your point of view.*

At one time or another, whether we decide to attend a university or move to a city for a new job, we may decide to live with someone else. However, before we choose to live with someone else, we should consider what type of person we will be most compatible with. In considering **qualities** in a **roommate**, I think **honesty, respect, and cleanliness** are the **most important ones**, especially if i want to get along with him/her.

First of all, if I choose to live with **someone** else, **he or she** must be **honest**. We will be sharing our house, including food, electronic equipment, jewelry, and other valuable items. When I go to school to attend my biology class, for example, I do not want to worry about my valuable gold necklace being taken by a dishonest roommate.

Second of all, being **respectful** is a requirement of **anyone** who chooses to live with me. Of course, this must be reciprocal, meaning that, in order for someone to respect me, I must show respect for him/her. For instance, if I have have friends over to hang out, I will show respect to my roommate by not being really noisy if it is late. Also, before having my get-together, I will get permission from my roommate just to ensure that my gathering does not conflict with any preexisting plans the he/she has already made. Likewise, I would hope that my roommate would also respect my privacy by not having overindulgent parties that may interfere with my private life.

Finally, in addition to being **honest** and **respectful**, I would certainly hope that my **roommate** is **clean**. Of course, not everyone is clean, but, if he/she is living with me, I would not want him/her to leave his/her underwear in the bathroom, to leave the cap off of the toothpaste, and to leave dishes unwashed in the sink. A few years ago, I lived with a group of guys, all of whom refused to clean the master bathroom. After a few weeks, the tub (which was supposed to be white) turned a brownish-black due to

the mold and scum that had built up. On another occasion, one of my roommates left his half-drunk soda can in the living room after watching television, and then thousands of ants invaded our house so that they could eat the sugar from his drink. These two examples show how uncleanliness can lead to unsanitary conditions, leading to unhealthy conditions, and ultimately leading to sickness.

To sum up, I hate to sound like I am a picky person, but **whoever** lives with me needs to at least meet the following standards, which I do not think are too much to ask of **anyone**: **honest**, **respectful**, and **clean**.

To create a coherent essay, in the thesis statement, the writer uses the words "qualities" and "roommate," both of which are previously mentioned in the writing prompt. Then, to connect the topic sentences back to the key words in the thesis, the writer repeats the words "honest," "respectful," and "clean." Also, in the fourth paragraph, the writer repeats the key words "honest" and "respectful" before introducing the topic of "clean." Referred to as a transitional sentence, it is effective in connecting paragraph four back to paragraphs two and three. Finally, in the conclusion, the writer repeats "honest," "respectful," and "clean" yet again so that the conclusion cohesively ties together the main points of the essay.

Parallel Structures

A fourth way to cohesively tie ideas together in your TOEFL speaking and writing is by using similar or parallel grammatical structures to contain similar ideas. Because readers and listeners recognize that repeated grammatical structures signal similar ideas, skillful writers will satisfy readers' expectations by grouping similar ideas in like ways. Moreover, parallel structure involves more than just how the sentences look but how they sound when silently spoken by that voice we use when we read silently. In a sense, using parallel structures create a type of refrain, a regularly recurring phrase or verse that is commonly used, for example, at the end of a stanza of a poem or a song.

Therefore, when two sentences sound or look alike, TOEFL iBT human raters will assume that the concepts about which you are speaking or writing are also alike.

Consider the following writing prompt and the paragraph that follows:

Which do you prefer: bicycling or running? Use specific reasons and examples to support your point of view?

One reason why I prefer running over bicycling is the cost involved. Which form of exercise requires purchasing a helmet and bicycle which can cost more than \$1,000? Which form of exercise requires purchasing an expensive mile-counting computer? Which form of exercise requires purchasing expensive pants, shirts, and gloves and other forms of safety equipment to make the rider visible while sharing the road with automobiles? Bicycling requires all of these things. In contrast, running does not require the purchase of helmets, bicycles, mile-counting computers, and expensive apparel. It requires the purchase of a few items: shoes, shorts, singlets, and watches. Comparatively speaking, if I want to run, I can probably purchase everything I need for as little as \$150.00, which is a lot less than what I would spend if I want to bicycle. Therefore, I prefer running since it is a lot less expensive than bicycling.

Notice how the writer highlights the high costs of bicycles by using a series of grammatically similar questions (ie., "Which form...?") right after the topic sentence. And, it is this use of parallel structure that helps to cohesively tie the ideas together in the above paragraph.