

IMPROVE YOUR WRITING

Coherence in Texts

An aspect of written English requiring extra attention this year is mentioned specifically in the following bullet point in the curriculum:

(Eleven skal kunne)

- *skrive formelle og uformelle tekster med god struktur og sammenheng om personlige, tverrfaglige og samfunnsmessige temaer*

Sammenheng/samanhang in English is *coherence*, and it refers to how the parts of a text work together to make a logical whole. A text that lacks coherence is one that doesn't hang together, that lacks a feeling of logical progression.

Texts *cohere* in different ways. In a story, for example, coherence is often a question of how a sequence of events is organised and structured so that it is easy to follow. We call this *narrative coherence* and if you have ever heard someone telling a rather long joke very badly, you will know how important it is. It is not enough to get events in the right order. They have to be linked together so that the result is both understandable and exciting. Some people have a natural gift for narrative coherence and can manage it “off the cuff”. The rest of us have to work at it more consciously. Fortunately, we have time to do this when we write.

There are many writing tasks in *Passage* that will require narrative coherence. Some of them invite you to write a story, either of your own invention or based on a story in the book. Other more formal genres requiring narrative coherence are reports, for example newspaper reports or police reports.

Activities

The following jokes are told in “telegram-style”. Write them out in full, making them as entertaining as possible.

Wild West. A cowboy goes into saloon. Lots of cowboys drinking. Goes towards bar. Looks up. Two pieces of meat hanging from ceiling. Asks bartender why. Bartender: If you can jump up and fetch them down, you get free drink. If you can't, you buy everyone a drink. Want to try? Cowboy: No. Steaks/stakes too high.

First World War. Evening before the big attack. Australian soldier standing alone, looking at the sun setting behind trenches. English officer sees him. Comes up. Puts hand on shoulder. English officer: Have you come here to die? Australian soldier: No. I came here yesterday.

Scotsman driving home. Crashes with another car. English driver. Scotsman apologises. Offers Englishman a drink from whisky bottle. Englishman accepts. Scotsman offers another. English: Won't you have one? Scotsman: Maybe. When police have gone.

Other texts require a different sort of coherence. If you are going to explain something – for example, a topic you know something about – coherence will depend on how well you organize your material. This time it is not events that need organizing, but ideas and information. You will need to focus on some things at the expense of others and to move from one aspect of your subject to another without losing the thread. A type of text requiring this sort of coherence is *the expository essay* (expose = show). You can find many examples of expository essay tasks in *Passage*, e.g. on pp. 93 (6.b), 149 (4.a), 310 (6.c).

Some writing tasks ask you give your views on an issue. Sometimes the task takes the form of a *letter to the editor* i.e. a fairly short expression of opinion written to a newspaper. A similar but longer type of text is *the persuasive essay*. In both cases the coherence depends on how well you argue your case. Clearly stated opinions and well-founded arguments will help persuade your readers of the wisdom of your views. For more about persuasive essays, see pp. 93 (6.a), 52 (6.b), 209 (3.a and b).

When we explain things or argue a point of view face to face with other people we can use a whole range of oral skills to make sure our listeners follow our train of thought – for example: intonation, stress, facial expressions and body language. In writing we don't have these skills at our disposal, so we have to use other tools – text layout, paragraphs and punctuation, to name a few. These things are not just ornamentation or “formalities”. They are essential ingredients for good, coherent writing.