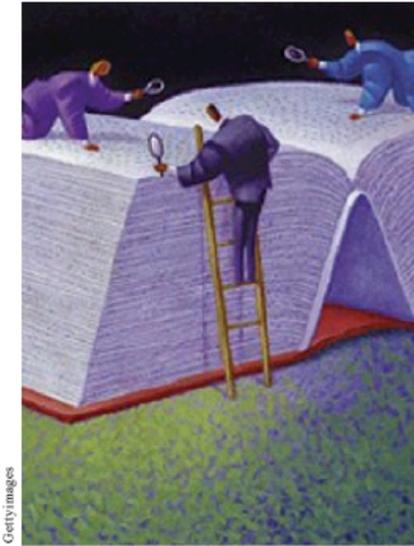


The Legal Writer

Building Bridges:

Connecting Islands of Ideas

By Suzanne E. Rowe



I remember driving through the Florida Keys, where individual islands in brilliant blue water are connected by an amazing span of bridges. The natural wonder of islands with white sand surrounded by blue water is what draws visitors to the Keys, but it's the bridges that make the trip possible.

I have this flashback whenever I read a paragraph containing islands of information with no bridges connecting them. While each bit of information is fascinating, as a reader I shouldn't have to rent a boat to get from one to another. The writer should connect them for me, building bridges to lead me through the analysis.

Here are some suggestions for building helpful bridges in your writing, along with cautions about construction that can leave readers stranded.

Laying the Foundation

Before bridging language can work, the ideas in a paragraph must be in the right order. No amount of concrete can clearly and logically connect islands of ideas that are out of order. Imagine the spaghetti effect of bridges trying to connect the first sentence to the fourth, back to the third, over to the sixth, etc. The writer of this mess needs to decide the order in which a reader should arrive at each island and build appropriate bridges to get her there.

Bridging with Repetition

Often the clearest bridging language simply repeats an idea from the end of one sentence at the beginning of the next sentence. The repetition connects the other concepts in the two sentences.

Consider, for example, a paragraph explaining the rule for summary judgment in a federal case brought under the Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act (EMTALA). The writer needs to show which facts are material, beginning with a brief explanation of what determines materiality in general and then relating that explanation to EMTALA. The italicized words in the following sentences are the bridges.

A material fact is one that “might affect the outcome of the suit under the *governing law*.” The *governing law* in this suit is the Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act. That *act* requires plaintiffs to prove they received treatment different from other patients at that hospital with similar symptoms. Thus, facts about the treatment of both the plaintiff and other patients at that hospital are material.

The bridge between the first and second sentences is *governing law*. The bridge between the second and third sentences is *act*. Of course, you don’t want to go too far with repetition between sentences; think of building a two-lane bridge, not a superhighway.

CAUTION: Flipped Bridge

Sometimes building a useful bridge simply requires flipping the order of the sentence. In other words, the repetition that creates the bridge might be at the end of the second sentence rather than the beginning. What if our initial example read this way?

A material fact is one that “might affect the outcome of the suit under the *governing law*.” In this suit, the Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act is the *governing law*.

The reader has to get to the end of the second sentence, remembering the long name of a statute, before learning how the two sentences connect. A simple flip from ending to beginning creates a bridge:

A material fact is one that “might affect the outcome of the suit under the *governing law*.” The *governing law* in this suit is the Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act.

CAUTION: Missing Bridge

The missing bridge leaves the reader wondering where she is and how she got there. This example is missing a bridge, expressing the same ideas as the last example, but with different words:

Material facts are determined by the substantive law and would affect the outcome of the case. Under EMTALA (um, excuse me, dear writer, but how did I get here?), a plaintiff must prove that he received disparate treatment from the hospital.

Maybe the reader infers that EMTALA is the substantive law, but why not add a little bridge to make that clear?

Material facts are determined by the *substantive law* and would affect the outcome of the case. Under EMTALA, the *substantive law* in this case, a plaintiff must prove that he received disparate treatment from the hospital.

Bridging with Numbers

If a claim has three elements, the most helpful bridges might be “First... Second... Third....” Numbers might also be useful in an opening paragraph that provides a roadmap of the points to be covered in a paper. In discussing summary judgment, for example, the writer may want to analyze three points: first, which facts are material; second, whether a genuine dispute exists; and third, whether the client is entitled to judgment as a matter of law. Numbers are useful bridges in both of these instances.

CAUTION: Random Numbers

Sometimes busy writers number sentences without any thought as to whether the numbers advance the analysis or show logical connections. Notice how the numbers in the following example do nothing to build bridges:

First, a material fact is one that “might affect the outcome of the suit under the governing law.” *Second*, this suit was brought under the Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act. *Third*, plaintiffs must prove they received treatment different from other patients at that hospital with similar symptoms.

This paragraph feels like an outline, with sentences numbered solely to show the order in which they should be written. Of course your readers can count, so only number sentences when doing so helps show your organization or builds meaningful bridges.

Bridging with Orientation Words

Orientation words tell us where we are among the islands of ideas in a single paragraph; they orient us as we travel. Here are some common orientation words, following their meanings:

Continuing the argument:

In addition

Additionally

Moreover

Further

Shifting to a counterargument:

However

In contrast

On the other hand

Instead

Concluding the argument:

Therefore

Thus

In conclusion

In sum

Note that each word or phrase builds a particular bridge. A transition like “Therefore” or “Thus” needs to be a bridge from prior ideas to the conclusion. In our first example, the last sentence summed up the prior ideas and reached a conclusion about material facts:

Thus, facts about the treatment of both the plaintiff and other patients at that hospital are material.

Lists of bridging words that orient the reader in your ideas are easy to access. Just search the Internet for “transition words,” then bookmark your favorite list.

CAUTION: Unfinished Construction

Sometimes the writer realizes that a bridge is needed, but doesn’t have the time or energy to build one. Instead, the writer throws up a random column of concrete that provides a signal, but of what? If I’m on one island and need to get to the next, a single pile of concrete in the midst of the water won’t replace a bridge. Take a look:

Material facts are determined by the substantive law and would affect the outcome of the case. *Additionally*, under EMTALA, a plaintiff must prove that he received disparate treatment from the hospital.

The word *additionally* certainly lets the reader know that the two sentences need a bridge. But the second sentence isn’t really adding more information to the first; instead, it’s continuing a line of analysis. *Additionally* doesn’t provide the connecting information that we got with “the substantive law in this case.” *Additionally* is a bridge to nowhere.

Sometimes a writer tosses in *Finally* when it doesn’t provide any bridge at all; the word simply signals that this is the last sentence the writer has thought of. Or the paragraph uses *Therefore* to introduce a sentence that doesn’t really state the conclusion that logically results from the paragraph. Consider either of these endings to the first example:

Finally, our client should be granted summary judgment.

Therefore, our client should be granted summary judgment.

Both of those examples are premature endings that provide incorrect orientation. *Finally* shouldn’t appear mid-argument. *Therefore* should be the logical conclusion of the paragraph, but this paragraph hasn’t completed the argument yet.

My personal least favorite unfinished construction is *As such*.... It almost never tells me anything about how the ideas on separate islands connect. Instead, it leaves me stuck in the sand wondering, “Such what?”

Conclusion

The beauty of the bridges through the Florida Keys is that they lead the traveler forward and you never notice that they’re there. The wonder is in the water and the sand and the islands.

Note:

Quotations in this article are from *Anderson v. Liberty Lobby, Inc.*, 477 U.S. 242, 248 (1986).

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