

### Keeping Your Essay Cohesive: The Spine

In your oral presentations, many of you expressed concern about cohesion. You felt you had begun to digest your sources, but that you hadn't found a guiding force to motivate and focus the essay. In other words, you were worried that your essays had no *spine*. To build one, you need a limited, controlled, and interwoven set of elements—foundational sources, central debates, dominant themes, key terms, striking images, sustained metaphors, crucial questions—that keep you focused.

Notice the elements writers we've read have used to give their essays spines:

Chip Brown, "The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Deer":

- A recurring image: Parasomniacs in the sleep lab
- A source: The research of Mahowald and Scheck
- A question: Are parasomnias psychologically meaningful?

Kelly, "Prozac: The End of Self or Just the Beginning?":

- A source: Lauren Slater's Prozac Diary
- A question: What does Prozac reveal about personality?
- A metaphor: Prozac = swallowing the sea (borrowed from Slater)

Jonah Lehrer, "Disorder Is Good for You":

- A debate: Darwin (order) vs. Thomson (chaos)
- Striking images: glowing bacteria, mutant flies, etc.

### Your Essay's Spine

In writing groups, discuss the elements of your essay that have potential to form a spine. Make a list of at least two, but not more than four of these elements. How can you use them to focus the essay? What concrete strategies might you use to orchestrate these elements so that they will make your essay cohesive?

## Transitions

Strong transitions build and develop the spine of an essay. Some transitions are mechanical: *in addition, moreover, another, next, similarly*, etc. Other transitions make substantive connections between one idea and the next:

Even though Freud rejected the idea that dreams contain fixed or universal symbols, in later revisions of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, his method evolved in the direction of the symbolic approach he previously dismissed.

La Berge acknowledges the recreational possibilities of lucid dreaming, but his real emphasis is on their therapeutic value.

Mechanical transitions are okay, in moderation, but every essay needs substantive transitions to develop connections between ideas. Are the transitions in your draft mechanical or substantive? Is the ratio balanced? Do you include transitions when you need them?

In order to answer these questions, circle or highlight the first and last sentences of every paragraph in your draft. Then, with the “spine” of your essay in mind, talk through each transition with your group. Discuss the details or ideas you are linking and brainstorm about effective ways to use transitions to demonstrate conceptual connections. How does each transition relate to the spine? (They won’t all relate directly, but enough of them should to keep the essay cohesive.)