

# The Textual Metafunction

Theme/Rheme and Given/New as an  
Organising Principle for the Teaching of  
Clarity and Style in Writing to ESL Students

David Fonteyn  
AMEP Teacher  
Macquarie Community College

# Outline

1. Theme/Rheme
2. Coherence
3. Cohesion
4. Exercises
5. Ideas for Use in the Classroom and Discussion
6. Some Classroom Resources

# Theme/Rheme

- What is Theme?
  - Everything up to and including the subject of the main clause.
    - Some friends and I** went to the beach on Sunday.
    - On Sunday, some friends and I** went to the beach. (fronted adverbial)
    - Everything by Picasso, I** like. (fronted object)
    - A wonderful husband, he** is. (fronted complement)
  - It is what the sentence is about.
    - The deep red sun** is setting over the horizon.
    - The sky** has a deep red setting sun over the horizon.
  - It is the equivalent of putting the words into **BOLD**
- Rheme: the rest of the clause – what is being said about that Theme.

- Different kinds of theme in writing:

1. Topical Themes

- carrying the 'content'

***The rising Australian dollar*** is comfort for some, concern for others.

2. Orienting Themes

- connecting words or phrases

***In contrast, the Australian dollar*** is rising.

3. Opinion Themes

- Present the writer's opinion on the sentence

***Worryingly, the Australian dollar*** is rising.

4. Qualifying Themes

- Describe the degree of reliability of the information

***Possibly, the Australian dollar*** will rise in coming weeks.

5. Dependent clause or phrase as Theme

***Because the mining boom is driving the economy,*** the Australian dollar is now rising.

***Because of the mining boom,*** the Australian dollar is rising.

- Compound sentences:

It was hot and humid on Sunday, and some friends and I went to the beach.

Some friends and I went to the beach on Sunday, for it was hot and humid.

- Compound and Complex sentences are two important resources for manipulating what is put into Thematic position.
- Can help with understanding punctuation.

# Coherence

- a paragraph should have unity.
  - So, the sentences are related in some way.
  - **Adjacent sentences are mutually relevant** (one builds on the other)
  - The theme is a significant carrier of the relevance of a sentence to the previous one.
- If not, there should be a clear reason for the deviation.
  - this should be **signaled** to the reader.
    - **Oriending themes** help to clarify the relevance/relationship and warn the reader of the change in direction and its purpose.

# Coherence between adjacent sentences can come through:

## 1. Constant Theme

Eg: **Some friends and I** went to the beach on Sunday. **We** had a good day.

## 2. Hypertheme

- more specific aspect of a general point

Eg: **Some friends and I** went to the beach on Sunday. **I** had a good day but **they** didn't. **John** complained all day about the weather. **Jane** didn't like the wild surf.

## 3. Flowing Theme

- emerging from the *Rheme* of a previous sentence

Eg: **Some friends and I** went to the beach on Sunday. **The weather** was terrible. **So, it** wasn't too crowded.

## 4. Referring to a whole previous clause/sentence

Eg: **Some friends and I** went to the beach on Sunday. **The trip** was fantastic.

# Constant Theme

**Gold, a precious metal,** is prized for two important characteristics. **First of all, gold** has a lustrous beauty that is resistant to corrosion. **Therefore, it** is suitable for jewelry, coins, and ornamental purposes. **Gold** never needs to be polished and will remain beautiful forever. **For example, a gold Macedonian coin** remains as untarnished today as the day it was made twenty five centuries ago. **Another important characteristic of gold** is its usefulness to industry and science. **For many years, it** has been used in hundreds of industrial applications, such as photography and dentistry. **The most recent use of gold** is in astronauts' suits. **Astronauts** wear gold-plated heat shields for protection when they go outside spaceships in space. **In conclusion, gold** is treasured not only for its beauty but also for its utility.

(from Oshima & Hogue *Writing Academic English*)

The following examples are from:

Mauranen, Anna. "Discourse Competence – Evidence from Thematic Development in Native and Non-native Texts." *Academic Writing*. Eds. Ventola, Eija & Anna Mauranen. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1996. 195-230.

# Hypertheme

**The results reported here** are similar to the findings of other reports based on more objective information. **For example, Swedish reports based on pharmacy data** show that the difference between male and female drug use in that country varies considerably from one drug class to another, with extremely large differences in the categories associated with women's reproductive role and much smaller differences in the use of expectorants, bronchodilators, cardiovasculars, and other drugs having less association with women's reproductive role. **A recent U.S. study based on detailed physician reports** also shows that 5 out of the 10 drugs most frequently ordered for 15 to 24-year old women related to women's reproductive role, including two oral contraceptives, two prenatal vitamins, and a vaginal fungicide. **Our drug use findings** also are similar to findings concerning sex differences in use of outpatient facilities. **Earlier studies** seem to have substantially exaggerated the magnitude of sex differences in physician utilization and medication use and provide little basis to support the hypothesis of physician bias.

- This text has a constant hypertheme of **pharmacy research**
- Developed through general/specific themes

## Progressing Theme

**Successful sea captains** weren't the only ones to find Elizabeth's favour. **Under her rule, England** enjoyed a flowering of the arts, especially literature. **Names like Shakespeare, Bacon, Spencer, and Sidney** commanded as much respect as Raleigh, Grenville, Drake, and Hawkins.

- Paragraphs like this have a more dynamic feel/style
- Typically, paragraphs utilise a combination of thematic development – constant, progressing, and hypertheme.

Example of a problem in paragraph coherence due to “unrelated” themes:

(1)**Vegetation** covers the earth, except for those areas continuously covered with ice, or utterly scorched by continual heat. (2)**Richly fertilised plains and river valleys** are places where plants grow most richly, **but** also at the edge of perpetual snow in high mountains. (3)**The ocean and its edges, as well as in and around lakes and swamps,** are densely vegetated. (4)**The cracks of busy city sidewalks** have plants in them as well as in seemingly barren cliffs. (5)**Before humans existed, the earth** was covered with vegetation, **and the earth** will have vegetation long after evolutionary history swallows us up.

- NB, It's not completely incoherent – there are relationships
- But the reader has to work hard to find the relationships
- That should be the work of the writer

- Improved thematic development with framing

Constant Theme

The Earth's vegetation is vigorous. This strength in its capacity to not only survive but thrive suggests that while human lifestyles and behaviours are largely destructive toward plant life on Earth, humans will never be able to threaten it. The vigorous nature of plants on Earth can be seen in the fact that

(1)vegetation covers the whole Earth, except for those areas continuously covered with ice, or utterly scorched by continual heat. (2)While plants grow most richly in fertilized plains and valleys, they are also found in great abundance at the edge of perpetual snow in high mountains.

(3)Furthermore, dense vegetation is found not only on land but in the ocean and its edges, as well as in and around lakes and swamps. However, it is in places that are most affected by human activity, such as in cities and their infrastructure, that the capacity of vegetation to survive and thrive is most clearly demonstrated. (4) For example, wild plants are found growing freely in great diversity in the cracks of busy sidewalks, streets, and abandoned properties. (5) Clearly, vegetation covered the Earth well before humans existed; it will cover the earth long after evolutionary history swallows us up.

- Utilise grammatical choices to organise the information you want into thematic position:

- Passive

Eg: The Queen *respected* Shakespeare and Bacon.

Shakespeare and Bacon *were respected* by the Queen.

- Changing the verb.

Eg: The Queen *respected* Shakespeare and Bacon.

Shakespeare and Bacon *commanded* respect from the Queen.

- Cleft

It was **from his wife** that John stole a lot of money.

- Existential

There are **a lot of problems** in the world.

- Fronting

**Coffee** I like in the morning.

- Coordination

- Subordination

# Cohesion – Given/New

- Good writers start with things that are known (build a common ground) and add something new and **interesting** to it.
- Generally the sentence or clause begins with Old or Given information and ends with New information
- Also consider what the **focus** of the new information is. The further it is to the end of the sentence, the more focus it will have.

Eg            John stole a lot of money from his wife.

               John stole from his wife a lot of money.

## Example

**(1) Over the last couple of decades, increasing housing costs in the major cities** have been undermining the egalitarian nature of Australian society.

(2a) **During that period, the cost of housing** has outstripped increases in individual or family income.

(2b) **During that period, increases in individual or family income** have been outstripped by the cost of housing.

**(3) This increase** has multiple consequences in relation to equity within Australian society.

**(1) Over the last couple of decades, increasing housing costs in the major cities** have been undermining the egalitarian nature of Australian society. **(2a) During that period, the cost of housing** has outstripped increases in individual or family income. **(3) This increase** has multiple consequences in relation to equity within Australian society.

- Focus of new information (from Williams & Colomb):
  1. The president's tendency to rewrite the constitution **is the biggest danger to the nation, in my opinion, at least.**
  2. The biggest danger to the nation, in my opinion at least, **is the president's tendency to rewrite the constitution.**
  3. In my opinion at least, the biggest danger to the nation **is the president's tendency to rewrite the constitution.**

Try to rewrite:

There are limited opportunities for faculty to work with individual students in large colleges and universities.

Building suburban housing developments in floodplains has led to the existence of extensive and widespread flooding and economic disaster in parts of our country in recent years, it is now clear.

- Classroom activities ?

1. Read differently written paragraphs (but on the same topic) and decide which one is easier to read and discuss why
2. Underline themes in a text
3. Observe flow of given to new information
4. Rewrite sentences focusing on different new information
5. Rewrite paragraphs using different themes
6. Rewrite sentences using different grammatical devices to refocus theme of new information
7. Edit each other's paragraphs based on above
8. Reassemble jumbled sentences (jigsaw)
9. Choose between a number of options for which is the best sentence to fit into a paragraph.
10. ?

# Some Classroom Resources

- Williams & Colomb, *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*
- Martha Kolln, *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*
- Thomson & Droga, *Effective Academic Writing: An Essay-Writing Workbook for school and University*
- Humphrey, Droga & Feez, *Grammar and Meaning*