

Textual Organization of Academic Writing

Duane Leonard

Tiina Hukari

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Our presentation showed how we help our students improve their organizational skills in academic writing. The ideas came from our theoretical class at University of California, Davis where we both are graduate students in the applied linguistics. We had read Lock (1996) who uses the terms *theme* and *rheme* to discuss textual organization. According to Lock (1996) theme is “a jumping-off point, or point of departure, of the message in the clause” (p.222). Theme can be thought of as the first component in the clause and shows the reader what the clause is all about. Rheme, according to Lock (1996), is “a part of the message that is presented as most important, or most newsworthy” (p.222). In our lessons, we defined theme as everything before the main verb and rheme as everything after the main verb. There are two issues that a theme/rheme analysis can shed light on. For example, it is important not to use the same theme throughout an entire paragraph. Instead, students can be encouraged to use different themes to refer to the same person, idea, or object. It is also very common in academic writing that what is presented at the end of one clause then serves as the beginning the next, as theme allows the writer to relate the sentence logically with the previous sentence. Information introduced in the rheme (last part of clause) is picked up and recast as the theme of the next clause.

Lesson 1: Variety in the theme

The following examples are from a theme/rheme lesson for undergraduate ESL students. The students responded to a prompt “Which one do you prefer paper and pencil testing or computerized testing?” In this student’s paragraph, all of her sentences start with conjunctions. What I wanted the student to do was to think about expanding her ideas in the paragraph, really developing the argument she was making. I showed her how thinking about the themes in the paragraph could help. The following is the student’s “before” paragraph:

Paper and pencil is more secure than computerized. For instance, if a computer is down

while a tester is taking the test, then the tester will lose all of her answers. On the other hand, if we use a paper test, we may not need to concern about this situation. Moreover, assume the tester is a beginner on a computer and she presses wrong button accidentally, she may lose her answers. As a result, she must retype her answers to the computer. However, when a test taker makes mistakes she is able to go back to the previous (page/question) immediately.

Without saying that using conjunctions is a bad thing, I wanted to make the students aware that not each sentence needs to start with a conjunction, and that when using conjunctions, they should make logical connections between sentences. After the lesson on theme and rheme and many activities looking at theme/rheme in authentic texts, the students re-wrote their paragraphs. The following is the re-written version of student's paragraph.

Paper and pencil test is more secure than computerized test because the computer may not be controlled by testers who do not know how to use computer. For instance, the tester will lose all of her/his answers when she/he is taking a computerized test. We do not need to be concerned about this situation when the tester is taking a paper and pencil test. The tester who is the beginner on a computer will lose all of answers if she/he presses wrong button accidentally. The tester is able to go back to the previous page if he/she taking a test on a paper and a tester gives a wrong answer.

The student was able to relate the themes and rhemes in this revised paragraph. For example, in the first sentence, the student mentions "testers," which is then carried onto the theme position of the next sentence as "the tester." The second sentence starts with a conjunction, which shows that the student is able to make logical connections between sentences

with conjunctions. At the end of the third sentence the student introduces “the tester” in the rheme position and is then able to move that idea into the theme position of the next sentence. This is improvement from the original sentence, in which the student’s rheme of the previous sentence (*we*) does not match with the theme (*the tester*) of the next sentence. The student succeeded in relating the sentences logically with the previous sentences by using related themes. The next step would be to encourage the student to think alternative ways to present the same theme in her paragraph, rather than just using one theme “the tester”.

Lesson 2: Moving from rheme to theme

In the development of student writing, theme and rheme can be key in maintaining coherence in textual organization. By engaging the students in well defined discourse analysis of a "successful" academic writing text, then applying the same analysis to their own, students can see for themselves where their writing might be "lacking organization" and, more importantly, where their text *shows* signs of organization and development. What follows is a lesson in textual organization, of body paragraphs, that I have developed for my students. The text I dissect here is from a text-based model (Feez, 1998) repeatedly to highlight successful writing features. The subsequent tasks provide excellent scaffolding for students to develop a deeper awareness of the expository essay.

In the first body paragraph (of the typical five-paragraph essay) I have chosen to underline the verbs which signal the shift from theme to rheme. Once the teacher makes the choice of verbs to divide Theme and Rheme, the students' attention can then be used to generate discussion on how "focused" the author is in this paragraphs and what resources the author uses to maintain this "focus".

Should Marine Parks Remain Open in Australia?

It has been argued that dolphin parks provide the only opportunity for much of the public to see marine mammals (Smith, 1992). (1) Most Australians, so this argument goes, live in cities and never get to see these animals. (2) It is claimed that marine parks allow the average Australian to appreciate our marine wildlife. (3) However, as Smith states, dolphins, whales and seals can be viewed in the wild at a number of places on the Australian coast. (4) In fact, there are more places where they can be seen in the wild than places where they can be seen in captivity. (5) Moreover, most Australians would have to travel less to get to these locations than they would to get to the marine parks on the Gold Coast. (6) In addition, places where there are wild marine mammals do not charge an exorbitant entry fee - they are free.

(From [http://www.eslplanet.com/teacher tools/argueweb/modelmp.html](http://www.eslplanet.com/teacher%20tools/argueweb/modelmp.html))

Further division of the text into Theme and Rheme (Figure 2) demonstrates more clearly how this writer develops the rheme of the Topic Sentence in the theme of the next five of six sentences; (1) *public = Australians*; (2) *marine parks = the only opportunity*; (3) *marine mammals = dolphins whales and seals*; (5) *public = Australians*, and the concluding Theme (6) can be seen as a synonym for the entire rheme of the topic sentence. Examining and discussing this paragraph not only shows how the author of this text maintains textual cohesion, but provides concrete writing resources the students can then employ in their own writing.

Figure 2

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Rheme</u>
It has been argued that dolphin parks	provide the only opportunity for much of the public to see marine mammals.
<u>Theme</u>	<u>Rheme</u>
(1)Most Australians, so this argument goes,	live in cities and never get to see these animals.
(2)It is claimed that marine parks	allow the average Australian to appreciate our marine wildlife.
(3)However, as Smith states, dolphins, whales and seals	can be viewed in the wild at a number of places on the Australian coast.
(4)In fact, there are more places where they	can be seen in the wild than places where they can be seen in captivity.
(5)Moreover, most Australians	would have to travel less to get to these locations than they would to get to the marine parks on the Gold Coast.
(6)In addition, places where there are wild marine animals	do not charge an exorbitant entry fee - they are free.

The next stage is for the students to do such an analysis on a body paragraph of their own, showing where they develop ideas and where their writing goes off on tangents. Analysis of this paragraph's themes highlights the successful employment of conjunctions and reporting language as well as paragraph cohesion; all three resources combine to make this a great example for student to draw from when developing their own writing. These additional resources used in the successful paragraph could be examined in further lessons, providing a scaffolded series of lessons to aid both students and teachers benefit from such a theme/rheme analysis.

References

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