



## Cohesive writing

# Lexical choice

### WHAT IS COHESION?

Cohesion is a quality of effective writing. Cohesive writing helps readers understand how the details relate to the overall argument of a text and to follow it easily. The quality of cohesion in a written text is achieved by various means, which make different elements of the text hold together well: logical conjunction, grammatical referencing, lexical choice and paragraphing. This resource focuses on the choice of lexical items.

### CREATING LEXICAL COHESION WITHIN A TEXT

Lexical words are those that express the topic or ‘content’ of a text (as opposed to words that express grammatical functions, cohesive ties and rhetorical moves). Lexical words include nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. They need to be chosen carefully, to help readers quickly recognise the topic, see the context for discussing it, and see how the topic is being developed through the text. Words should be chosen with awareness of associations already established in the language. Words such as *pregnancy*, *nutrition* and *blood pressure* would more likely occur in a text about the health of an expectant mother, for example, than in a text about horticulture or astronomy. Words such as *teams*, *cooperation* and *outcomes* would most likely occur in a text about management. As soon as experienced readers see one key word, they will, quite unconsciously, start to predict certain other words that might occur in the text as it unfolds, and the more experienced they are in reading a particular field, the more quickly they can predict. Conversely, the less experienced a reader is in a particular field or language, the slower and more difficult their reading experience will tend to be, precisely because they can’t yet make as many predictions.

Lexical cohesion occurs when nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs in a text relate to each other in some way. They might relate to each other in terms of **repetition**, **synonymy** and **collocation**.

### REPETITION

When the same lexical item is repeated, in the same or different form, there is some contribution to the text’s overall cohesion. For example:

*All **children** in Australia have the right to be educated in their mother tongue. Many **children** in the past, however, have spent months or years in school without understanding lessons.*

*Julia Costello is facing a **difficult** situation at Western Technologies Corporation. She has **difficulty** functioning in the executive team.*

### SYNONYMY

Lexical cohesion also occurs when a different word is chosen but the meaning of the word is being repeated. For example:

*Julia Costello is facing a difficult situation at **Western Technologies Corporation**. She has difficulty functioning in **the company’s** executive team.*

Another type of synonymy is created when the words relate to each other in terms of category and sub-category, or general to specific, or part to whole. For example:

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### ACADEMIC LITERACY

*flax, hemp, and timber are all kinds of shipbuilding materials*

*human resources officer, manager, workers are all kinds of staff or employees in an organisation*

*the spillway, the dam wall are parts of a dam*

*the knee joint, the elbow joint are parts of the skeleton.*

## COLLOCATION

This is a more specific type of ‘expectancy relation’ between lexical items – occurring within a single noun group. Collocation describes when a given word is expected to occur along with another specific word. For example, while general lexical cohesion is created when the word *ailment* occurs in a text along with words such as *prescribe, diagnose, treat* and/or *contra-indications*, collocation is when a word is immediately followed by a predictable word or type of word. ‘Prescribe’, for example, is likely to be immediately followed by the name of a specific drug or dosage. The word ‘diagnose’ is predictably followed by a specific medical condition. The more a reader knows a particular field or language, the more easily they can predict collocations, and recognise when words put together by inexperienced writers do not normally belong together, for reasons of context or style.

The following student history essay demonstrates some effective cohesion through conjunction, reference, and lexical choices. Notice how the highlighted words relate to other words in this section of the text.

### Example: lexical cohesion in a History essay (synopsis section)

The decision to establish a **penal colony** at Botany Bay was based on more factors than just the need to dispose of **convicts**. Besides the suitable conditions of the area that promised to make the **convicts** self-sufficient within a year – favourable climate, fertile soil, ample food sources and its safe distance from **Britain** several other aspects of New South Wales made it appealing to the **country**. It offered an abundance of flax, hemp, and timber, which were much needed by the Navy at the time, as well as a strategic stronghold in the Pacific, which could be used in trade and defence. In addition, news of French interest in the area motivated quick action on the part of the **British** to claim the area using the most convenient reasons – the need for a dumping ground for **convicts**. Though the overcrowding of **hulks** in **Britain** is often offered as the primary reason for the establishment of a colony at Botany Bay, the decision to reinstitute **transportation** was actually made when numbers were down and conditions were improving in the **hulks**. Thus the **British** must have had other motives behind the choice. The **government** was not ignorant of the economic and military advantages of the area – numerous proposals by Matra, Call and Young made sure of that. And these considerations were not unique to Botany Bay. The economic and military values of Das Voltas and Lemain, among others were examined as well. Though the need to dispose of **convicts** may have been the stimulus behind it, the decision could not possibly have been made without looking at the larger picture.

*boxed words all relate to ‘penal colony’, by repetition, part/whole or collocation*

*underlined words all refer to Botany Bay, by repetition and synonymy*

*words in italics all refer to Britain, by repetition or synonymy*

## TRACING LINKS

Lexical cohesion in the example above is created between various words about the same topic (**penal colony, Botany Bay** and **Britain**), and between other items as well. Connections are created by **repetition** of the same word, by **synonymy**, by words indicating one thing is part of something else, and by predictable **collocations**.

Look again the same text example, and consider how some words go together in predictable ways.



### Example: lexical cohesion in a History essay (synopsis/introduction section)

The **decision** to establish a penal colony at Botany Bay was based on more **factors** than just the need to dispose of convicts. Besides the suitable conditions of the area that promised to make the convicts self-sufficient within a year - **favourable** climate, fertile soil, ample food sources and its safe distance from Britain several other aspects of New South Wales made it **appealing** to the country. It offered an abundance of flax, hemp, and timber, which were much needed by the Navy at the time, as well as a strategic stronghold in the Pacific, which could be used in trade and defence. In addition, news of French interest in the area motivated quick action on the part of the British to claim the area using the most convenient reasons – the need for a dumping ground for convicts. Though the overcrowding of hulks in Britain is often offered as the primary **reason** for the establishment of a colony at Botany Bay, the **decision** to reinstitute transportation was actually made when numbers were down and conditions were improving in the hulks. Thus the British must have had other **motives** behind the **choice**. The government was not ignorant of the economic and military advantages of the area – numerous proposals by Matra, Call and Young made sure of that. And these **considerations** were not unique to Botany Bay. The economic and military values of Das Voltas and Lemain, among others were examined as well. Though the need to dispose of convicts may have been the stimulus behind it, the **decision** could not possibly have been made without looking at the larger picture.

*repetition of 'decision'*  
*synonymy between 'decision' and 'choice'*  
*synonymy between 'factors', 'reasons', 'motives' and 'considerations'*  
*synonymy between 'favourable' and 'appealing'*  
*synonymy between 'ample' and 'abundance'*  
*'navy' = part of 'defence'*  
*synonymy between 'advantages' and 'values' in this text*

