

# Bridget A. Lyons

Writer, Editor, and Interpretive Sorceress

## Bridget's Guide to Creating Flow

When it comes to writing, people like to use the word “flow.” I know this because I am one of them.

“You’ve got good flow going here,” I may have written in the margin of your manuscript.  
Or: “I’m doing some reordering here to improve your flow.”

While we all have an intuitive sense of what flow is in a piece of writing, and we often can recognize both when it is there and when it is not, it’s not all that obvious how flow is created. Some people even consider flowy writing to be a mystical superpower—something like “the Force” which you either have or you don’t. Rest assured, it’s not. As with every other writing skill, creating flow is about paying attention, learning a few tools, and applying them judiciously.

In this resource sheet, I’ll be explaining what I see as the three levels of flow:

- Document-level flow,
- Paragraph-level flow, and
- Sentence-level flow.

I’ll examine what they look like in nonfiction, fiction, and memoir and offer some tools for creating them in your writing.

### 1. Document-level flow

The big question when it comes to document-level flow is:

*Are the topics or events presented in an order that makes sense?*

#### *Nonfiction*

Most nonfiction (though not all!) aims to teach the reader something. As we all know, humans learn best when material is presented to us an easily followed progression. For most of us, that means we are presented with manageable chunks of new information that start with basic concepts and progress to more complex ones. The foundations of the knowledge being imparted—definitions of terms, assumptions, starting points, etc.—are typically presented first and then built upon. For this reason, creating document-level flow in an informational non-

fiction book generally requires some sort of outline. Some authors have a detailed one written out before they even type a word. Many others write for a long time without one but go back to assemble an outline when they're part of the way through their book and have a clear sense of what it's doing and where it's going. Still others don't make an outline until they are done, at which time they create what's called a "reverse outline." A reverse outline is just what it sounds like: an outline you make as you read through an already-written document. It enables you to see how you organized your book (or didn't...). Chances are that when you do this, you'll find some sections that are "not in the flow." Seeing the existing outline on the page makes it easy to move chunks of text around first in the outline, then in the manuscript. Regardless of when in the process you decide to create an outline, having one is critical to creating and manipulating nonfiction flow.

### *Fiction and Memoir*

Flow can look very different in fiction and memoir because your goal in writing them may not be to instruct—or if it is, it's not through traditional information-based instruction. You may be wanting to introduce time jumps, leave out key details, and throw the reader off-kilter with jarring scenes. In these cases, you might find yourself deliberately interrupting flow. But, guess what? To monkey with your flow, you need to know how to create it in the first place! To undo something, you need to first know how to do it. For this reason, I recommend that you maintain a logical timeline of the events that occur in your fictional or memoiristic narrative. This is probably a separate document that you consult and add to as you write—something like the outline you'd be making for a nonfiction book that lays out the progression of events your narrator or characters lived. While you may write with a book that completely overturns that progression—which is more than fine!—you still need to know what the timeline *would be* if you were to present it. You need to know how you would create flow if you had to so that you can "uncreate" it in the ingenious fashion you envision.

Of course, it's totally fair to write fiction and memoir that is naturally flowy too! If you're doing that, follow the guidelines set out in the nonfiction section above.

## **2. Paragraph-level flow**

The big question when it comes to paragraph-level flow is:

*Can the reader move smoothly through the section or chapter?*

### *Nonfiction*

If you have a solid organizational strategy, then your chapter or section has a well-defined topic. Knowing where your topic begins and ends is the key to smooth paragraph-level flow. In informational nonfiction, I am a big fan of presenting "mini road-maps" at the beginning of each chapter that let the reader know what material is going to be covered. If you write one of those, following it is the first rule of paragraph-level flow.

If you know anything about the flow of water in a river, it is strengthened when the river has strong banks. It's the same with writing; strong banks make for good flow, leading the reader to the inevitable conclusion that you're drawing.

So, how do you build strong banks?

Here are a few ideas:

- *Tell the reader what you're doing (and why) before you do it.* Craft solid topic sentences. Pause mid-paragraph to clarify what you're doing and review if the topic is especially complex.
- *Tell the reader what you did.* Remember this tip from middle school English? It continues to apply. Make sure your reader knows what was just presented to them by giving them clear conclusion sentences.
- *Increase connectivity between your paragraphs with back-references.* The more you can thread your previous terms, definitions, concepts, and insights into later paragraphs, the better. Not only are you reinforcing previously-taught material, you're building flow. Think of it like providing lots of hyperlinks on your website.
- *Be careful of detours.* Ideally, you gave your reader a mini-road map and you're sticking to it. If you turn off the main highway to take a tour through the woods, make sure you have a good reason to do so. Consider telling the reader that you're taking a detour and explaining why it's worth their time. Unmarked and/or unintentional detours are flow-killers.

#### *Fiction and Memoir*

Paragraph level flow is a more artistic endeavor in fiction and memoir, especially if you are presenting a non-chronological narrative or one that has intentional topic or time jumps. Still, the tips above can apply to fiction and memoir. And again, I think it is worth knowing how to create paragraph-level flow so that you can un-create it if you so desire.

### **3. Sentence-level flow**

The big question when it comes to sentence-level flow is:

*Does the reader feel pulled forward from sentence to sentence?*

What pulls a reader forward can vary widely depending on the type of writing you are doing. Nevertheless, the ideas you entertain as you strengthen flow are typically the same, regardless of your genre.

They include:

- *Sentence variety.* Typically, readers are pulled along more when sentences are varied. Some are longer, some are shorter. Some are simple subject-verb-direct object sentences; others have multiple embedded clauses. Some have dialogue, some do not. Some begin with names or pronouns, others begin with introductory clauses and present the name or pronoun doing the action later in the sentence. Mixing up your sentence styles keeps the reader on their toes and increases flow...unless you want the next effect, that is...
- *Occasional sentence sameness.* While sentence variety is frequently your goal, there are great reasons to repeat sentence structures too. When presenting complex material, it's a good way to keep the number of "scary" factors down to a minimum. It's also a great way to emphasize the repetition of events or directly link a sentence in one paragraph back to one in another paragraph. Short, simple, repetitive sentences in action scenes can increase pace as well as flow. Sentence sameness is a technique to use sparingly, but it's a powerful tool to have in your quiver.
- *Back-references.* I mentioned these in paragraph-level flow, but they apply here too. Reiterating previously used terms, definitions, concepts, and insights helps to knit your sentences together.
- *Intentional repetition of vocabulary.* This is one of my favorites. By and large, readers prefer vocabulary to be varied. I constantly read and reread my work to ensure that I am not repeating any uncommon words...unless I want to. I often deliberately repeat juicy words—the kind of 10-cent things you know your reader will notice—in order to carry flow forward from one paragraph to the next.
- *Use of the active voice.* The active voice almost always increases flow and keeps your reader moving. If you use the passive voice, it should typically be a choice done to create a desired effect.
- *Elimination of redundancy.* When we write our drafts, we have the tendency to say the same thing a number of different ways. This can be super helpful, as it gets us to clarify our ideas and gives us the option of choosing the best version of their expression. Just make sure to make that best choice and cut the rest! Don't repeat yourself unless you have a good reason to do so.
- *Elimination of extraneous words.* Somewhere along the line, a lot of folks I seemed to have been told that wordy sentences sound "smarter." This just isn't true. Clean, clear sentences are the most effective ones. If you're being verbose for a reason (like, this is how your character talks), terrific. Just make sure you have a reason.
- *Use of transition words.* Words like "nevertheless," "regardless," "however," and their multi-word cousins like, "along the way," "in the process," and "as a result," are incredibly

effective ways to link a sentence to the one that preceded it. I'm a fan. Keep in mind, though, that they, like all good tools, can be overused.

### **Final Tips**

Once you've tried all of this, the best way to determine whether or not you have succeeded in creating flow is by reading your text out loud to yourself. Yes, you have to read it OUT LOUD. Why? Because reading out loud uses a different part of your brain from silent reading. When new neurons are recruited to evaluate your writing, they are more likely to register the problems that you've missed and missed again. I can't recommend this step highly enough.

Finally, my biggest suggestion for learning to improve flow in your writing is to read good writing! The more we read others' strong writing, the more we internalize the rhythms, structures, and tools they use. Dissecting a piece of writing you admire to see how it was constructed can reveal all sorts of fascinating strategies ready to be applied to your own work.

*If you have any questions about any of this or want to run your ideas by me,  
I'm always happy to help with this process!  
Just reach out...*