

Coherence in the Narrative and Persuasive Writing of Adolescents

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Abstract. This study examined students' narratives and persuasive essays to see if there was a difference in coherence between the two. This study's sample included Junior High students in the seventh and eighth grades in a diverse urban public school, whose narrative and argumentative essays were rated for coherence using Bamberg's (1984) Holistic Coherence Scale. The goal of the study was to look at how genre affects students' coherence. Thus this study used coherence as a tool to better understand two interesting questions: how genre affects writing and the importance of genre in instruction. The results also have bearing on the debate over the relation between cohesion and coherence. The study found that coherence was not significantly different between persuasive and narrative essays.

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Introduction

The origin of coherence as a defining quality of good writing probably dates from the mid 1800s, when Alexander Bain laid down the first rule of the paragraph: "The bearing of each sentence upon what precedes shall be explicit and unmistakable." (Quoted in Bamberg, 1984). He also divided prose discourse into the traditional four discourse modes, and determined that the quality of writing in each mode was a product of how well the writer handled unity, mass (later known as emphasis), and coherence (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996 and McCulley, 1985). Bain's analysis was seminal and influenced writing instruction in his native England as well as the United States well into this century.

Although many parts of his legacy have been supplanted by new concepts and ways of looking at writing, his division of prose writing into four discourse modes and his notion of coherence seem still to hold sway in many circles. In fact, both of these 19th century ideas are important to this study, which examines if coherence varies between genres in seventh and eighth grade students' writing. We will now examine what work has already been done in this area, looking first at studies relating to coherence and then at research concerning genre.

Related Studies

Coherence is still thought of as one of the key defining characteristics of the quality of writing and has been the subject of much recent research. However, since Halliday and Hasan's taxonomy, *Cohesion in English* (1976), was published, many have confused their measure of cohesion with coherence. Although Halliday and Hasan did not explicitly discuss the link between these two terms in their book, they state their goals in such a way that makes it clear that they view cohesion as a factor in coherence:

If a speaker of English hears or reads a passage of the language which is more than one sentence in length, he can normally decide without difficulty whether it forms a