

Using signposts

SIGNPOSTS

A *signpost* is a device that indicates relationships among ideas. A signpost may be a word or phrase – “and,” “in other words” – but it need not be. Many punctuation marks are signposts, as you can appreciate by considering the different roles of periods, semicolons, and colons. Similarly, the topic sentence of a paragraph may be marked simply by its position at the beginning of that paragraph, and the title of a work may be marked by font size; these devices, too, are signposts.

I encourage you to use signposts *very* generously in your expository writing. But I also encourage you to use *concise* signposts. Thus, I offer you a list of concise signposting expressions to suit various purposes.

To indicate evidential or explanatory relations:	since; because; so; therefore; thus; hence; for. (You can also use a colon for this.)
To indicate coordination:	and; moreover; further; also; too; in addition; as well.
To indicate contrast:	however; but; yet; nevertheless; nonetheless; although; despite; by contrast; on the one hand/on the other hand. (You can also use italics for this.)
To indicate confidence:	surely; certainly. (Use these sparingly!)
To introduce an example:	for example; for instance; e.g. (which is Latin for “for example”).
To introduce an exact restatement:	in other words; that is; i.e. (which is Latin for “that is”).
To introduce a more precise restatement:	in particular; specifically.
To introduce a concession:	to be sure; admittedly.

A word of warning. Many students think that voicing phrases, like “Schaffer argues that” or “according to Moss’s account,” are signposts. This is incorrect! Adding a signpost to an assertion does not *subtract* any information; it only *adds* information about how various ideas relate to each other. By contrast, voicing phrases do subtract information: if you say, “Schaffer argues that *p*,” you are not saying, “*p*” – you might think that Schaffer’s argument is mistaken.

Typically, you should replace lengthy signposts with these concise ones. For example:

Replace:	With:
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This is because	For
This shows that	Thus,
What x means by this is that	In other words,
x is evidence for y .	x , so y .

There are, however, two notable reasons for deliberately using lengthy signposts.

First, you may wish to use a lengthy signpost *for special emphasis*. For example, when introducing the thesis of a paper, you might say, “The thesis of this paper is that” However, you must reserve this technique for special occasions if it is to have its desired effect.

Second, you may wish to use a lengthy signpost *to make your writing feel more natural*. For example, you might introduce an explanation by saying, “The idea is this.” However, you should use this technique sparingly – for example, to introduce an especially long and complex thought – to ensure that your writing does not feel flabby.

But these are exceptions to the rule. As a default, you should use concise signposts.