

# Before You Read

## Nobel Banquet Speech, 1993

by Toni Morrison

### READING SKILLS: LOGIC, COHERENCE, AND CONSISTENCY

What if a sports story in a newspaper started by summarizing a baseball game and suddenly shifted to a discussion about a highly paid basketball star? You'd probably be pretty confused. In order for a text to make sense and hold together, it should be logical and coherent.

**Logic** is simply correct reasoning. A statement is logical if it is supported by reasons, evidence, and examples. A **coherent** text is easily understood and flows naturally from one idea to the next. One way writers make a text coherent is by using **transitional words** to connect ideas. A text that is both logical and coherent has **internal consistency**, which means that all of its parts work together and make sense.

As you read Toni Morrison's speech, notice the transitional words she uses to give the speech coherence. The list below shows how transitional words are used and gives examples of words used in each situation.

Type of Transition	Words Used
Connecting ideas in time sequence, or <b>chronologically</b>	first, next, before, then, when, while, meanwhile, at last
Connecting things in <b>space</b>	above, across, among, before, below, here, in, near, there, under, next to
Connecting ideas in <b>order of importance</b>	first, mainly, more important, to begin with, then, last
Connecting ideas by <b>cause and effect</b>	because, as a result of, since, therefore, so
<b>Comparing</b> ideas	also, and, another, just as, like, similarly
<b>Contrasting</b> ideas	although, but, however, still, yet, on the other hand

SKILLS  
FOCUS

**Reading Skills**  
Understand logic, coherence, and consistency.

# Nobel Banquet Speech, 1993

Toni Morrison

## BACKGROUND: Informational Text and Literature

The Nobel Prize in literature has been presented since 1901 to writers who have produced outstanding work that focuses on a certain ideal. Toni Morrison was awarded the prize in 1993 for her visionary and poetic writings. She was the first African American woman to be presented with the honor. The awards ceremony took place at the Stockholm Concert Hall in Stockholm, Sweden. The king and queen of Sweden and other members of Sweden's royal family attended the awards banquet, where Morrison gave the following speech.

### CLARIFY

Re-read lines 1–12. What phrases help you understand the “debt” Morrison feels to previous Nobel laureates?

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Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I entered this hall pleasantly haunted by those who have entered it before me. That company of Laureates<sup>1</sup> is both daunting and welcoming, for among its lists are names of persons whose work has made whole worlds available to me. The sweep and specificity of their art have sometimes broken my heart with the courage and clarity of its vision. The astonishing brilliance with which they practiced their craft has challenged and nurtured my own. My debt to them rivals the profound one I owe to the Swedish Academy for having selected me to join that distinguished alumnae.

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1. Laureates (lôr'ē-its): winners of the Nobel Prize.

Nobel banquet speech by Toni Morrison from *Les Prix Nobel: The Nobel Prizes 1993*. Copyright © The Nobel Foundation. Reproduced by permission of The Nobel Foundation.



AP/Wide World Photos

Toni Morrison receives the Nobel Prize in literature, 1993.

Early in October an artist friend left a message which I kept on the answering service for weeks and played back every once in a while just to hear the trembling pleasure in her voice and the faith in her words. "My dear sister," she said, "the prize that is yours is also ours and could not have been placed in better hands." The spirit of her message with its earned optimism and sublime trust marks this day for me.

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I will leave this hall, however, with a new and much more delightful haunting than the one I felt upon entering: that is the company of Laureates yet to come. Those who, even as I speak, are mining, sifting and polishing languages for illuminations none of us has dreamed of. But whether or not any one of them secures a place in this pantheon,<sup>2</sup> the gathering of these writers is unmistakable and mounting. Their voices bespeak civilizations gone and yet to be; the precipice<sup>3</sup> from which their imaginations gaze will rivet us; they do not blink nor turn away.

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It is, therefore, mindful of the gifts of my predecessors, the blessing of my sisters, in joyful anticipation of writers to come that I accept the honor the Swedish Academy has done me, and ask you to share what is for me a moment of grace.

2. **pantheon** (pan'thē-än') *n.*: group of famous and distinguished persons.  
 3. **precipice** (pres'ə-pis) *n.*: here, a high place.

**FLUENCY**

Read lines 13–19 aloud several times. Strive to read the passage as clearly and smoothly as you can. Try to capture the tone of the "trembling pleasure" in the message left by Morrison's friend.

**IDENTIFY**

Underline the word that indicates that two ideas are being contrasted in lines 20–22. What two ideas are being contrasted?

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**IDENTIFY**

What transition word is used in line 24? What type of transition is this?

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**WORD STUDY**

The prefix *pre-* means "before." How would you define the word *predecessors*?

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# Skills Review

## Nobel Banquet Speech, 1993

### COMPREHENSION

**Reading Comprehension** Answer each question below.

1. Why was Toni Morrison awarded the Nobel Prize in literature? When was this prize first awarded? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. To whom does Morrison feel she is indebted? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What did Morrison do with her friend's congratulatory message?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. When Morrison leaves the hall, whom does she expect to think about?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. What does Morrison ask her audience to share with her? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_