

Ending the Essay: Conclusions

So much is at stake in writing a conclusion. This is, after all, your last chance to persuade your readers to your point of view, to impress yourself upon them as a writer and thinker. And the impression you create in your conclusion will shape the impression that stays with your readers after they've finished the essay.

The end of an essay should therefore convey a sense of completeness and closure as well as a sense of the lingering possibilities of the topic, its larger meaning, its implications: the final paragraph should close the discussion without closing it off.

To establish a sense of closure, you might do one or more of the following:

- Conclude by linking the last paragraph to the first, perhaps by reiterating a word or phrase you used at the beginning.
- Conclude with a sentence composed mainly of one-syllable words. Simple language can help create an effect of understated drama.
- Conclude with a sentence that's compound or parallel in structure; such sentences can establish a sense of balance or order that may feel just right at the end of a complex discussion.
- Conclude by synthesizing rather than summarizing. Explain how your reasons, evidence, and discussion tie together.

To close the discussion without closing it off, you might do one or more of the following:

- Conclude with a quotation from or reference to a primary or secondary source, one that amplifies your main point or puts it in a different perspective. A quotation from, say, the novel or poem you're writing about can add texture and specificity to your discussion; a critic or scholar can help confirm or complicate your final point.

For example, you might conclude an essay on the idea of home in James Joyce's short story collection, *Dubliners*, with information about Joyce's own complex feelings towards Dublin, his home. Or you might end with a biographer's statement about Joyce's attitude toward Dublin, which could illuminate his characters' responses to the city. Just be cautious, especially about using secondary material: make sure that you get the last word.

- Conclude by setting your discussion into a different, perhaps larger, context.

For example, you might end an essay on nineteenth-century muckraking journalism by linking it to a current newsmagazine program like *60 Minutes*.

- Conclude by redefining one of the key terms of your argument.

For example, an essay on Marx's treatment of the conflict between wage labor and capital might begin with Marx's claim that the "capitalist economy is . . . a gigantic enterprise of

dehumanization"; the essay might end by suggesting that Marxist analysis is itself dehumanizing because it construes everything in economic—rather than moral or ethical—terms.

- Conclude by considering the implications of your argument (or analysis or discussion).

What does your argument imply, or involve, or suggest? For example, an essay on the novel *Ambiguous Adventure*, by the Senegalese writer Cheikh Hamidou Kane, might open with the idea that the protagonist's development suggests Kane's belief in the need to integrate Western materialism and Sufi spirituality in modern Senegal. The conclusion might make the new but related point that the novel on the whole suggests that such an integration is (or isn't) possible.

- Conclude by calling the reader to action.

If your paper outlines some specific problems, you might use the conclusion to propose viable solutions. For example, an essay on the high cost of prescription drugs might suggest that smaller states group together and buy in bulk or that the federal government subsidize the cost of research and development.

Finally, some advice on how not to end an essay:

- Don't simply summarize your essay. A brief summary of your argument may be useful, especially if your essay is long—more than ten pages or so. But shorter essays tend not to require a restatement of your main ideas.
- Avoid phrases like "in conclusion," "to conclude," "in summary," and "to sum up." These phrases can be useful—even welcome—in oral presentations. But readers can see, by the tell-tale compression of the pages, when an essay is about to end. You'll irritate your audience if you belabor the obvious.
- Don't introduce a new subtopic. Readers may become confused if new evidence enters the discussion when you seem to be making your final remarks.
- Resist the urge to apologize. If you've immersed yourself in your subject, you now know a good deal more about it than you can possibly include in a five- or ten- or 20-page essay. As a result, by the time you've finished writing, you may be having some doubts about what you've produced. (And if you haven't immersed yourself in your subject, you may be feeling even more doubtful about your essay as you approach the conclusion.) Repress those doubts. Don't undercut your authority by saying things like, "this is just one approach to the subject; there may be other, better approaches. . ."

Adapted from Pat Bellanca (Writing Center at Harvard University, 1998)