

THE CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH

What It Does

Many books, movies, and speeches have achieved lasting fame because of their final lines. A conclusion has the power to draw together and clarify everything that has previously been said. If it is skillfully and dramatically constructed, the conclusion can be not only a summing up that bears the weight of all that has gone before it, but also a strong, succinct message in its own right.

The concluding paragraphs of your essays always deserve a lot of thought. Why work so long and so hard at composing a stimulating introduction and well developed body paragraphs if your effect is to be weakened by your conclusion? From one point of view, the conclusion of your essay is its most important part. It is your last word on the subject, your last chance to make your point to your readers.

A strong concluding statement is essential. It should focus your readers' attention on the main points, and hold that attention as effectively as the introduction does. What, then, do all writers want a conclusion to do? Primarily, it should sum up, give readers a sense of completeness or finality, and perhaps help convince them. A common way of achieving these ends is to restate, in other words, the essay's controlling idea. This repetition underscores the points the entire essay has made and presents them (sometimes actually listing them) for the readers' consideration one final time. Often this restatement appears in the first sentence or two of the conclusion.

You can then expand your discussion by making some general concluding remarks--perhaps ending with a strong emphatic statement as a climax. If you intend your last lines to be remembered, the concluding paragraph must prepare your readers for this climax so it will not seem too abrupt. Dramatic last lines are even more effective when introduced gradually.

This way of organizing a conclusion enables you to let your readers go gradually, and to complete the essay while still holding their interest. It is not a gimmick or an oversimplification, but a technique many professional writers use quite often.

The actual form of the ending will vary somewhat according to the purpose and length of the piece of writing. A one-paragraph ending may be sufficient for a short essay, but a longer term paper or a book may require a conclusion whose momentum takes several paragraphs to build. On the other hand, a one-line conclusion may be suitable for a short fable, or a one-or two-paragraph exam answer. The important thing to remember is to construct your conclusions only after carefully considering the demands of the essay you are writing.

Some Examples

Six commonly used concluding strategies are:

1. Restatement
2. Chronological wind-up
3. Illustration
4. Prediction
5. Recommendation of a course of action
6. Quotation or dialogue

1. **Restatement**. This is the most familiar type of conclusion. The controlling idea is repeated in different words, and the main points of the essay's argument are reviewed or restated. A straightforward essay, whose introductory paragraph is a direct announcement, will end this way. Restatement has the advantage of reinforcing one last time all your major points. For this reason, it is an excellent concluding strategy for an essay which seeks to prove a point.

An answer to a question on an early childhood development midterm ends with a restatement of the student's major points:

If a day-care center offers trained personnel, a spacious and safe environment, and creatively designed equipment, it can be a positive influence on a child. As recent studies have shown, there is no reason why a well-run day-care facility cannot be as warm and as stimulating as the child's home. As working parents realize this, many are passing up their traditional baby-sitter and turning to day-care centers.

In this answer this student discusses the advantages of day-care centers. The conclusion very effectively restates all the points that have been made. This technique is especially important on a test, when you want to present a logical, convincing, and easy-to-follow paper.

2. **Chronological Wind-up**. When a piece of writing "tells a story," it is natural to have its final paragraph tie up all loose ends by ending with what happened last. Personal experience essays and stories narrated in the first person often use this method. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's fictional Dr. Watson, first-person narrator of Sherlock Holmes' adventures, concludes a story in this manner:

And that was how a great scandal threatened to affect the kingdom of Bohemia, and how the best plans of Mr. Sherlock Holmes were beaten by a woman's wit. He used to make merry over the cleverness of women, but I have not heard him do it of

late. And when he speaks of Irene Adler, or when he refers to her photograph, it is always under the honorable title of the woman. ("A Scandal in Bohemia.")

Similarly, this student ends a personal experience essay with a chronological wind-up:

The next few years of my life passed quickly, probably because I was so busy. In the space of three years I got my equivalency diploma and held down three jobs--in sales, in the restaurant business, and in a men's clothing store. I also hitchhiked around the country. When I came back from my trip, I decided to return to school, and that's how I wound up in this English class, taking the first step toward getting a college degree.

The last paragraph of this essay ties all the loose ends together, leaving no room for further development. The student completes the narrative by bringing us up to the present.

3. **Illustration** To make an abstract or general conclusion more concrete and specific, you may choose to follow a restatement of your controlling idea with one or more specific examples to illustrate it. A reference to a relevant news item can often serve this purpose. In academic situations, you can make your essays clearer by adding specific examples in the conclusion to illustrate the restatement of the controlling idea. A student in an economics class ended a paper with a series of concrete examples:

Despite the price gouging of oil companies and the reluctance of the Congress to formulate a coordinated domestic energy policy, there are some signs of hope. One such sign is a government study that recommends four encouraging options. The first is to put into effect a small program with limited rationing of oil resources. The second approach is to undertake a large project with emphasis on lower energy use and finding more domestic energy sources. The third option would be an all-out war against the energy problem. This would involve exploitation of shale oil, and immediate exploration and development of off-shore oil reserves. The fourth and final course would be a balanced ecologically oriented program that would attempt to cut down American energy use. Certainly, these courses of action do not solve our country's energy problems, but they do show that the government is finally approaching the issue in a more organized, methodical fashion than it has in the past.

By stating the government agency's "four options," the writer places his abstract ideas about "signs of hope" in perspective.

4. **Prediction** Writing designed to convince or persuade your readers may very naturally end with a prediction that takes the conclusion a step further than a summary. This type of conclusion does sum up the essay's main points, but it also enables the writer to make certain

additional projections on the basis of those points. An article that somewhat humorously decries discrimination against short people and proclaims their natural superiority concludes with this prediction:

I am not suggesting for a moment that we actively dispose of existing tall people or that we selectively breed for shortness. Many of my best friends are tall, and I will not be a party to sizism. I am merely noting that, evolution being what it is, tall people are not long for this world. When small is beautiful and less is more, nature will single out us small people and make sure that we grow (numerically) apace. People will start taking pride in the fact that their children are shorter than they are. Aunts will exclaim, "How small Johnny is staying!" Before long, tall people will be taking such defensive lines as "Good things come in large packages." It will not happen tomorrow, but it will happen. Short people are the wavelet of the future. (Beth Luey, "Short Shrift," Newsweek, February 27, 1978.)

Students often use predictions as conclusions for essays and essay examinations. After discussing a series of facts on an economics exam, you might want to show how those facts might affect the future: "If some reforms are not immediately instituted in the Social Security system, there might be no money left for those of us who will be ready to collect our checks forty-five years hence." You can see the same strategy used in all kinds of writing from journal articles to student essays.

A nursing student ended his paper for a public health course with this prediction:

Even though there has not been a case of smallpox in the United States for years, children should still be vaccinated against this disease. Despite the assurances of many doctors to the contrary, some physicians still recommend this course of action. As far as this vocal minority is concerned, it is extremely likely that failure to immunize against smallpox could result in an outbreak of epidemic proportions just like the one that recently occurred in Somalia.

5. **Recommendation of a Course of Action** When you feel you have convinced your readers, you want to recommend action. Writers of business correspondence are especially aware of the advantages of ending their letters with an appeal for action. Advertisements plead, "Don't forget, before it's too late. Clip this coupon and send away now." In editorials or political speeches, the call for action is usually the writer's main purpose. In these and other kinds of persuasive writing, it can be psychologically very effective to conclude by appealing to the reader for action.

A recommended course of action is almost always a part of political writing. A notable example is the very effective final paragraph of Marx and Engels' Communist Manifesto:

The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling class tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Workingmen of all countries, unite!

Student writers also sometimes find occasion to recommend action. This paragraph concluded a student essay that discussed the harmful effects of food additives:

Every month the Food and Drug Administration finds that another food additive has harmful effects on humans. BHA, BHT, MSG, and red dye #2 are only a few of the substances under suspicion. In spite of this, food processors seem reluctant to eliminate additives from their food. It seems as if the only way we, the consumers, will be able to make our desires felt is to stop buying food that contains artificial preservatives and flavor enhancers. It is time for us to take an active part in determining what we eat.

The writer's use of "Let" in the first example and "It is time" in the second is characteristic of this type of concluding strategy.

Letters applying for a job also often conclude with an appeal or a request for action. The ending may combine a summary of the writer's qualifications with a request for an interview:

Since I plan to make teaching my permanent career, I would be a diligent and dedicated worker. I feel that both my job experience and my educational background in teaching the handicapped uniquely qualify me for this position. I can come to Boise for an interview at any time that would be convenient for you.

6. **Quotation or Dialogue**. As in the introduction, quotation can lend authority to a conclusion. Quotations by well-known authors can sometimes not only sum up your essay handsomely, but also enable you to use their distinctive writing styles to add variety and interest to your conclusion.

Professional writers and journalists use this strategy a great deal. Harrison Salisbury uses a quotation to end his essay "Print Journalism":

What is at stake was well said by Walter Lippmann in the aftermath of the

Eastland case: "The . . . principle of the First Amendment was not adopted in order to favor newspapermen and to make them privileged characters. It was adopted because a free society cannot exist without a free press. The First Amendment imposes many duties upon newspapermen who enjoy the privileges of this freedom. One of the prime duties of free journalists is that they should, to the best of their abilities, preserve intact for those who come after them the freedom which the First Amendment guarantees." (Playboy.)

By using Walter Lippmann's statement, Salisbury sums up his ideas and adds clout to his argument.

Quotations can be put to good use in your own writing. This conclusion from a final exam answer uses the words of Kurtz, a character from Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, to sum up:

In its tone and its theme, Heart of Darkness illustrates Conrad's mixed attitude toward colonialism. On the one hand, he felt that the ideal represented by colonialism was good and noble. On the other hand, Conrad could not ignore the evils and abuses being committed by Europeans in Africa, evils best expressed by Kurtz in his final comment, "The Horror! The Horror!"

Choosing the Best Conclusion

As with introductions, it is your purpose and occasion that determine what kind of conclusion you should use. In midterm or final exams, in technical reports--in any paper which your primary aim is to present information--a direct restatement or summary of your controlling idea may be your best strategy. Personal narratives, journal entries, and short stories can be effectively concluded with a chronological wind-up. Papers in which you try to convince readers that a point you are making is valid can be ended using illustration, prediction, recommendation of a course of action, or a quotation.

Kirszner & Mandell, Basic College Writing (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), pp. 66-73