

THREE WAYS TO CONCLUDE AN ESSAY

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The style of essay conclusions is as varied as the personalities of the writers and the topics they write about. However, they are all variations of three kinds of conclusions: ones that summarize; ones that editorialize; and ones that externalize. Grammar school and high school teachers often insist on the summary conclusion because it demonstrates an ability to encapsulate your writing concisely by reducing it to its main points. In college composition, though, where the topics are more complex and your writing is, likewise, more sophisticated, other methods of conclusion can bring to bear your individual voice, your creativity, even your politics, without violating the essay's topic.

ENDING WHERE YOU BEGAN

We take it for granted that conclusions must finish an essay, but in truth they are usually unnecessary: everything an essay needs is satisfied by the statement of its thesis in the introduction and by the development of its points in the body. Conclusions are, for the most part, *rhetorical*: they provide a "finish" that creates a dramatic effect. They leave the reader feeling as though an essay is rounded off, polished, balanced and symmetrical. Why readers demand this effect is up for debate, but here are some ways to think about that polish:

Narrative Sequencing: How an Idea is "Told"

As in paragraph development, sequencing provides a "flow" of ideas and a coherent pattern of development to an essay. However, whether that sequencing is chronological, spatial or emphatic, it still approximates a narrative thread--only with *ideas* instead of story events and characters--and readers like their essays to appear to have a narrative structure just like a good story. The satisfaction that comes from a good ending to a story is created by a sense of balance, symmetry and resolution. In essay writing, a good conclusion creates for the reader the feeling that resolution has been achieved, and resolution provides a sense of balance to the essay's "narrative."

Structure: How an Idea Is Organized

Essays follow a pattern of organization that structures the development of ideas, both for the writer and the reader. Regardless of the mode of that pattern (process analysis; comparison-contrast; classification-division; descriptive-narrative; etc.), most essays have an introduction: one or more paragraphs that "bookend" the discussion on the front end. Because readers look for symmetry, they enjoy one or more paragraphs at the back end of the essay--the other "bookend" to give the essay's structure its harmonious balance. Here's another analogy to help put this idea into perspective: filmmaking. If we think of essays as documentary films, and introductions as the camera "zooming in" to a topic from the general to the specific, then conclusions are the camera "zooming out" again.

Relevance: How an Idea Relates to Others

Unless you are assigned to write a broad survey or overview of a subject in the style of an encyclopedic article, most likely your essay will focus on a specific topic. A topic, however, is selected from a range of topics that fall under the heading of a subject. Another way to express balance and resolution in a conclusion is by demonstrating to the reader how your topic relates to others: to reveal the *system* of ideas in which your topic exists. If the introduction invites readers to focus their view narrowly on a single issue or topic, then the conclusion invites them to broaden their view and take in the bigger picture again. This could mean relating your essay's topic back to the subject, or it could mean connecting it to another topic that is related by subject. The satisfaction of such a conclusion comes from feeling that a single idea is balanced against others, and that the world of ideas in the essay is balanced with the world of ideas outside of it.

THREE WAYS TO CONCLUDE

A conclusion is best explained by comparing or contrasting it with the introduction to which it is symmetrical. Here is a sample introduction on the topic of voters ages 18 to 21. In the sample conclusions that will follow, take note of how the key features of the introduction are used differently to create different effects of balance and resolution. (*Thesis is in bold.)

Democracy is an extraordinary experiment in government by the people for the people. The right to vote grants to every adult the privilege to add a unique voice to that system of self- government. While most adults understand the value of this privilege, young people under the age of twenty-one continue to demonstrate the poorest understanding of political process and, consequently, are greatly underrepresented at the polls on election day. **A greater appreciation of how the political process ideally works, and of how younger voters may add to the diversity of government by the people, might begin with following a few important steps to become a better, more informed voter. Education, awareness, and active participation are all key to this process.***

SUMMARIZE

Effective for essays with technical subjects and clinical tones: reports; definitions; surveys; etc.

As a paraphrase of the thesis and a summary of main points covered in the body of the essay, this method of conclusion is appropriate for longer essays where readers might find such a reminder useful. In shorter essays of 3 to 5 pages, summary conclusions are not only unnecessary, they are clichéd (and often even begin with the cliché "In conclusion!"). Furthermore, because the point of this type of conclusion is strictly to summarize the main arguments of the essay, it should contain no reflexive references ("I feel," "in my opinion," etc.).

Example of a Summary Conclusion:

The right to vote is, indeed, a sacred privilege adding unique voices to a system of self-government. With a process of better education, improved political awareness, and more active political participation, young people under the age of twenty-one will have their own diverse and strong voices heard in elections, contributing their energies to social change and forging their own futures.

EDITORIALIZE

Effective for essays with strong personal connection, persuasive appeal and controversial subject matter

Depending on the subject matter, a writer may wish to conclude with a personal *commentary* on the essay's topic; this offers a provocative "outro-duction" where the writer can express a personal investment in the topic with an anecdote, or can reveal feelings, politics, personal positions, interpretations, concerns, etc.--all with the frank and open use of the writer's own language and identity, the same way an editorial in a newspaper would.

Example of an Editorial Conclusion:

I fear that, with a growing cynicism among young voters, a decision not to vote may seem like a means to making a disenchanting voice heard. This, however, is far from the reality. Every youthful voice lost on election day gives a greater power of control to the enemies of progress and social change. Every denied ballot places one more iron bar on the cage that imprisons our democracy. Youth voters may be a minority, but they are a powerful key to the freedom guaranteed by the democratic process. Stand up and be counted!

EXTERNALIZE

Effective for essays that focus on single issues part of broader complex topics and essays with potential for frequent digressions

Perfect for short essays and longer essays, alike, a conclusion with a transition to an external, but relevant, topic can leave readers thinking in a new direction. In fact, such a conclusion is actually a new introduction and thesis that the reader could develop into an extended discussion--a kind of "reverse hook" or transition to another potential essay. An externalizing conclusion can be a good opportunity to make use of those parts of the essay that had been edited out because they were not directly relevant to the discussion. In fact, you might gather material for such a conclusion by returning to your invention strategies and looking for other topic ideas that were explored but abandoned.

Example of an Externalizing Conclusion:

While younger voters continue to withdraw from the political process, knowing nothing and therefore believing in nothing, the greater responsibility lies with educational institutions to inspire them to become active voters. Until high schools and colleges take a more proactive role, disenfranchised young voters will grow into disenfranchised older voters. However, education in general has increasingly turned away from politics altogether in favor of greater focus on job skills. Just how educational institutions might stem the tide of decreased voter turnout is still a confounding matter for further investigation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While a college composition instructor may encourage you to explore different methods of writing conclusions, other instructors may have their own course-related agendas, and they may insist that a certain formula be used in your writing. *Be careful* to choose a method of conclusion that follows the guidelines of an essay or research paper assigned by your instructor. If you are unsure about which of these methods to conclude is permitted by the assignment, ask your instructor directly.