

The Conclusion: Your Paper's Final Impression

Overview

Conclusions serve a vital function in your paper. Without an effective conclusion, your paper will seem incomplete or unfinished. Your paper's introduction and body paragraphs will establish and prove your main points. Your paper's conclusion, then, will leave your reader with a final impression of your work. If your conclusion is clear, concise, and relevant to the topic, your ideas will seem polished. Remember, a conclusion must not be perfunctory; that is, it must not simply repeat the introduction. A successful conclusion will strengthen your paper and lend credibility to your ideas.

Strategies for Crafting a Pertinent, Thoughtful Conclusion

Your conclusion's **content, style, and organization** will vary depending on your paper's genre as well as its purpose, tone (point of view), and audience.

- For a **narrative**, your paper will likely conclude with an end to the story's action and some analysis or insight about an event's effect upon the characters' lives.
- A **thesis-driven essay**, however, should conclude with relevant insights about the paper's content and how grappling with the ideas in the paper have shaped your thinking about that topic. You may also discuss the larger ramifications of your topic.

An effective conclusion might do the following:

- 1) Tie together or demonstrate the relationship among the paper's main ideas and **reflect upon** those ideas
- 2) Restate the paper's main points (though not word-for-word) and their **implications**
- 3) Offer the reader a sense of closure
- 4) Challenge the reader to carefully evaluate your ideas and potentially act upon those ideas
- 5) Refer to an example to emphasize your point

An ineffective conclusion will do the following:

- 1) Depart from your paper's topic by introducing completely new or irrelevant ideas that will likely confuse your reader
- 2) Present a sermon or moral lesson that sounds "preachy" and might alienate your reader
- 3) Contradict or undermine your main argument
- 4) Repeat your introduction without fresh insight into what you have learned during the course of writing your paper

One approach to writing a conclusion is to ask yourself a series of questions such as the following:

- **How can I bring my paper's ideas together in a meaningful, insightful fashion?**
- **What are the last ideas that I want my reader to contemplate? Why do these ideas warrant the audience's consideration?**
- **What is the final impression of my work that I wish to leave? How can I be sure that I am leaving my reader with a thoughtful, powerful ending to my paper?**
- **How can I ensure that I am not introducing any unrelated ideas that stray from my topic?**

Once you have answered these questions, you will be well on your way to drafting an effective conclusion.

Types of Conclusions

Explore the Broader Implications

Reflecting upon the deeper implications of your argument is a thought-provoking method for ending a paper. In general, you should attempt to leave your readers with the impression that your argument has a relevance that transcends the scope of your paper. How is your topic connected to larger, related issues? This type of conclusion lends itself well to the research paper. For example, if you are writing on the effects of coal production on global warming trends, your conclusion might touch on the broader concept of how global warming affects environmental degradation.

The following example is the conclusion from Michael Gonzales's essay, "The Bilingual Trap," which argues against making English the official language of the United States and proposes that drastic improvements to educational programs, particularly bilingual education, will be more beneficial to students who are learning English.

Example:

Far from working toward union, making English an official language risks creating further divisions. It goes against the grain of how things have traditionally been done in this country, where there is no official religion nor family that represents the state. Reforming bilingual education and restricting government literature to English does not require an official language. We've done without one for 219 years. We don't need one now.

Michael Gonzales, "The Bilingual Trap," excerpt from *Successful College Writing*

Include an Example, Anecdote, or Illustration

To reinforce your paper's main points without summarizing those ideas, incorporate an appropriate example, anecdote, or illustration. This strategy engages the reader and can lend more concrete understanding to abstract arguments or ideas. Be sure that your example is directly relevant to your paper's topic and that it is appropriate in its tone (point of view), style, and length (usually quite brief).

The below excerpt is taken from Bharati Mukherjee's article, "Two Ways to Belong in America," which explores varying viewpoints about the issue of immigration. The first sentence of this example is from the paragraph immediately preceding the conclusion.

Example:

That sense of betrayal had its desired effect and drove me, and thousands like me, from the country.

Mira and I differ, however, in the ways in which we hope to interact with the country that we have chosen to live in. She is happier to live in America as expatriate Indian than as an immigrant American. I need to feel like a part of the community I have adopted (as I tried to feel in Canada as well). I need to put roots down, to vote and make the difference that I can. The price that the immigrant willingly pays, and that the exile avoids, is the trauma of self-transformation.

Bharati Mukherjee, "Two Ways to Belong in America,"
excerpt from *The Writer's Presence*

Provide a Synopsis

This type of conclusion will often restate the paper's main ideas. Although this type of conclusion can resemble the paper's introduction, the phrasing should *sharply differ* from the introduction. To avoid repeating the introduction, be sure to add relevant analysis of your subject. Generally, use this type of conclusion for a longer, more complex paper that warrants an overview of the main points.

Example:

Adolescents' bodily decorations, at times radical and dramatic in their presentation, can be seen in terms of figuration rather than disfigurement, of the natural body being through them transformed into a personalized body (Brain 1979). They can often be understood as self-constructive and adorning efforts, rather than prematurely subsumed as mutilatory and destructive acts. If we bear all of this in mind, we may not only arrive at a position to pass more reasoned clinical judgment, but become sensitized through our patients' skins to another level of their internal reality.

Andres Martin, "On Teenagers and Tattoos," excerpt from *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing*

Refer Back to the Introduction

This type of conclusion will revisit a main point or example from your introduction. Therefore, your paper will seem well-structured and will provide your reader with a sense of closure. Again, avoid simply repeating the introduction. Rather, demonstrate that you have thought carefully about the topic and that your ideas have expanded beyond those stated in the introduction.

Example:

The following excerpt is Charity Miller's introduction:

It is Tuesday, September 23, 2003, and I am thrilled to see a bake sale as I walk out of the West Bridge exit of the Hughes-Trigg Student Center. Spotting Rice Krispies, my favorite, on the table, I excitedly skip over because I suffer from what I like to call "college-student-starvation around-11am syndrome." But I stop midway as I read a red-lettered poster taped to the front of the table: "Affirmative Action is Racist." Initially, the sign does not deter my determination to purchase my Rice Krispie. *We are all entitled to our own opinions*, I privately resolve. Then I see another poster that allocates prices for the goodies according to race and gender: White males, \$1, White females, \$0.75, Hispanics, \$0.50, and Blacks, \$0.25. The radical poster pricks my interest, so I ask the student vendor, "What is this about?"

This excerpt is Miller's conclusion:

Has Affirmative Action outlived its purpose in all colleges and universities? Has Affirmative Action become racist? According to the minority enrollment statistics on college campuses, the best answer is "No, not yet." Minorities are still underrepresented. However, some schools, such as SMU, no longer adhere to Affirmative Action policies, and minority percentages are still increasing. The 2003 incoming class at SMU is one of its most diverse ever (Wertheimer 6b). This proves that Affirmative Action has impacted some schools and is becoming less necessary. Soon, all citizens will receive more equal opportunities for higher education. Once we have achieved this new "fairness," then signs that read, "Affirmative Action is Racist" will uphold justice. I believe this day is approaching, but until it comes, I will gratefully buy my Rice Krispies Treat for \$0.25.

Charity Miller, "When Will Race Lose the Race?" excerpt from *The Aims of Argument: A Text and Reader*

Call the Reader to Some Form of Action

To engage your reader, suggest a plan of action relevant to your topic. For example, if your paper outlines some specific problems, you might use the conclusion to propose some viable solutions. This type of conclusion often offers a solution, analyzing positives and also reflecting upon the outcomes of other possible resolutions. Consider your audience and purpose, and avoid a call to action that might inadvertently seem accusatory or that might potentially alienate or offend your audience.

Example:

Simply opening the doors and letting women in, or any individuals whose styles do not conform to those already in place, is not enough. As the experience of the executive at the training center showed, neither are localized efforts at diversity training, though surely these can help if they are done well. Finally, we can't just tell individuals that they should simply talk one way or another, as if ways of talking were hats you can put on when you enter an office and take off when you leave. For one thing, if you try to adopt a style that does not come naturally to you, you leave behind your intuitions and may well behave in ways inappropriate in any style or betray the discomfort you actually feel. Most important, we do not regard the way we talk—how we say what we mean, how we show consideration or frustration to others—as superficial, masks to be donned and doffed at will. Comprehensive training and awareness are needed, until everyone is working to make the workplace a world where differing styles are understood and appreciated.

Deborah Tannen, "Marked: Women in the Workplace," excerpt from *The Gender Reader*

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