

THE "WRITE" STUFF

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IN CONCLUSION . . .

Your closing words create a final impression of you and your ideas in your readers' minds. Yet, most of us struggle at times with how to end an essay effectively. Have you ever read a paper that ended so abruptly that you wondered if the "real" last page got stuck in the printer and the author simply didn't notice? More to the point, have you ever written a paper like that? Then read on!

CONCLUSIONS

A classic "old saw" about writing advises you to *Say what you're gonna say; say it; and tell 'em what you said*. While it's true an essay needs a conclusion--and an introduction and body, for that matter--this advice is pretty useless, especially when you're writing a typical college essay of three to five pages. Your reader isn't likely to forget what you've said in a brief essay, especially if you've begun each paragraph with a clear, concise topic sentence.

An effective conclusion does more than reiterate what's already been said. It helps your readers put your information into a context; it gives your readers something to think about; and it lends your essay a sense of "closure." A conclusion should be written with intention and care. Consider these strategies for writing a conclusion.

Sum up your main points: Again, when you write a brief essay, you shouldn't need to restate your main points. In a longer piece, it can be useful to restate your main and supporting points in your conclusion. However, take care NOT to copy sentences from the body of the essay verbatim (word for word). Vary your language. Make the conclusion interesting to read, even if it's a summary.

Suggest a solution or next steps: If you have written about a problem, you might consider suggesting a solution to it in your conclusion. This strategy works particularly well when you're writing on the job.

For instance, human service workers often must evaluate a program's effectiveness, a client's progress, or an employee's performance. It's usually appropriate to close an evaluation with praise for what is being done well and suggestions for further improvement, even if the program, client, or employee is doing well.

This strategy isn't limited to workplace writing, however. For instance, one of our students wrote a research essay about sickle cell anemia. In her conclusion, she called for African American couples to be tested for the gene that causes this disease--so that they will better understand the potential risks to their children--and for doctors to be sure they stay up-to-date with current information about this disease so that they can treat their patients as safely and effectively as possible.

Suggesting "next steps" gives your essay a greater purpose. You not only inform your readers and/or offer a critique, but also try to bring about change.

Set your ideas in a wider context: This strategy calls for you to explain the relevance, or importance, of what you've said. For instance, the student mentioned above was shocked to discover how

little information she could find about sickle cell disease. In her conclusion, she also tallied up how many people in America and in the world as a whole suffers from sickle cell anemia. Her numbers were staggering. They made readers better understand the suffering that this disease causes on a global scale and, therefore, made them want to learn even more about the disease.

When you put your ideas into a "wider perspective," you are, in effect, answering readers who might ask you, "Yes, but why should I care?" When you set your ideas into a wider context, you explain the importance of your topic and suggest why your information might be directly relevant to your readers.

Raise further questions and issues: In this strategy, you raise what issues remain. For instance, if the author of the sickle-cell essay were to raise further questions, she could explore why her local bookstore did not carry much information about sickle cell. She would have to find out if the books were simply sold out, or if the store can't afford to stock them because of insufficient demand. However, she might discover that books on sickle cell simply don't exist.

If such books don't exist, the author could examine why not. Is research into sickle cell disease under funded? If so, why? Because grant dollars are so limited that researchers must concentrate their efforts on diseases with higher rates of mortality than sickle cell--like cancer and AIDS? Or because of "medical racism"?

You don't always have to answer your questions. Each one might provide grist for an essay in and of itself! But raising questions and issues keeps your audience thinking about what you've said.

Give your readers something to remember: Ending with a bold or memorable statement also keeps readers thinking about your writing. For instance, in his essay "McDonalds is Bad for Your Kids," Amitai Etzioni argues that fast-food jobs are so routinized that kids who do them don't gain any new skills; require such long hours that many of the kids who work them don't have the time or energy to do their homework or participate in academic or athletic after-school activities; and offer a paycheck that tantalizes kids to drop out of school to work full-time. Etzioni ends the essay with the words: "Go back to school." That statement summarizes everything that Etzioni believes is at risk when kids work at fast-food jobs and it echoes in readers' minds, causing them to remember his point.

Now what? As with introductions, you may need to write several conclusions before you hit upon the "right" one. So get busy!