Building an Effective Conclusion

Inquire: The End Goal of Your Paper

Overview

When you come to the end of your paper, the goal of any conclusion, no matter what kind of paper you are writing, is to leave a strong impression on your reader and to make sure that they understand what you've been writing about. To do this effectively, rather than repeating yourself, what you want to do is restate what you've been discussing, and then bring it to a point of impact and relevance for your reader.

Big Question: How do I leave my audience with a strong understanding of my discussion?

Watch: Arriving at Your Destination

"Ok, that's all I've got. Thanks for reading." Not a very powerful ending, is it? Leaving your paper without an effective conclusion would be like arriving at your destination after a long road trip and then failing to get out of the car. Once you get to your destination, you want to wrap your trip up and move on. In the same way, once you get to the end of your paper, you want to wrap it up. That way, a reader who comes to the end of your paper will have enjoyed their journey and found the destination satisfying. They will have an understanding of what you've been discussing throughout your text and why it is relevant to them. In this way, both you — as the author — and your paper leave a strong impression.

When you come to the end of your paper, it's important to remember that by this point in your discussion, your main point should be able to stand on the strength of whatever evidential or rhetorical points you've made throughout the body of your essay. In other words, you aren't adding anything new to your paper in your conclusion that your reader hasn't read about up to this point. Rather, your purpose should be to tie everything together and emphasize the strength of your main idea and how it is connected to the points made throughout your paper.

While this may seem like you are simply repeating yourself, remember that saying you are going someplace doesn't necessarily mean that you actually get there. Your reader expects you to show them the whole picture and to make the connections between all of your points clear. To do this effectively, rather than repeating yourself, what you want to do is restate what you've been discussing, tying your points together and underscoring their relevance to your reader. As you write your concluding paragraph, be aware of the language you use and the way you structure your sentences. This is your last chance to impact your reader — make it count.

What do you think is the most impactful way of making your reader think about your ideas? How have you tied your discussions together in the past?
Read: The Final Statement

Overview: Repetition and Relevancy

Generally, a conclusion will restate the main ideas presented in a paper, summarize the conclusions drawn, and emphasize how everything fits together and is relevant to your reader. Restating your main ideas may seem unnecessarily redundant; however, this repetition of the ideas in your paper is important for demonstrating for your reader the complete picture of what you have written and how all the points you’ve made connect back to your thesis. This doesn’t mean going over each detail in your paper again, but rather restating, in as concise and direct language as possible, only the main idea and key points that form the backbone of your paper.

Establishing the relevancy of your ideas to your reader may also seem repetitive, especially if you feel you’ve already done this in your introduction. Again, this is still important, as you want to bring your reader full circle, and get them to think about your discussion beyond the theoretical, in a way that directly impacts them. Another way of thinking about this part of your paper is that the conclusion is your final statement on a subject, so making sure your reader understands what you have said and why you have written about it is of paramount importance.

Tailoring Your Conclusion

Conclusions are relatively straightforward regardless of what type of paper is being written. That being said, it’s also important to tailor your conclusion to your paper, that is, the language and purpose that you have used throughout. Remember that the conclusion is meant to draw your paper to a close, not reargue a point or reintroduce the evidence you’ve already used. Restatement means rewriting your thesis into a new form that is distinct from how it appears in your introduction, usually in terms of the force of language used. For example, argumentative papers will restate the thesis as a fact, and then briefly revisit how each of the points covered in the paper supports this fact. Similarly, scientific papers will usually have a conclusion that restates the hypothesis as either a proven theory or a disproven theory and explain how the evidence presented in the paper shows this to be the case. Again, the essential purpose of a conclusion is to hammer home the main purpose of the paper and give the reader a full picture of what they have read and why it is relevant to them.

Maximum Impact

When you are writing your conclusion, you should always be thinking about what you want your reader to take away from what you’ve written, either intellectually or emotionally. Whatever your main idea is, it should stick in the reader’s mind. Your writing should have the maximum amount of impact that you can put into your sentences without diverging from the previously established tone of your paper. Never apologize for or equivocate your thesis or conclusions. At this point, your paper should be able to stand on the strength of whatever evidence or rhetoric you’ve used throughout the body paragraphs, so attempting to soften your argument or account for discrepancies will only lessen the impact your paper has on your audience. Also, because your paper should be able to stand on what you have already covered, you should never introduce a new point in your conclusion. This will only make your paper seem disorganized and will confuse your reader. If you find that you have another point to discuss within your paper, revise your body paragraphs and add a section where you can analyze this new subtopic completely, and then include it when you revisit your main points in your conclusion.
The Last Thought

An effective conclusion will usually end with a final thought that leaves the reader thinking about your thesis and ideas in a context beyond the paper itself, usually by emphasizing the relevance of the main ideas to the reader in some way. This can take the form of a relevant question raised by the conclusions made in the paper or a wider statement that is implied by the conclusion made by your thesis and main points. If the paper uses anecdotal narratives, this final statement might also be the conclusion of that narrative. Whatever the case, the key to an effective final thought is that it causes the reader to reflect on what they have just read, keeping the discussion fresh in their minds, and bringing the paper full circle by re-establishing what made the subject interesting to the reader in the first place.

Reflect: Where to Start the End?

Poll
As stated previously, conclusions usually have a set of specific parts that each fulfill a purpose at the end of a paper. While many people usually write their conclusions straight through, others may decide to start on a section they find the easiest, or hardest, and go from there.

Where do you like to start your conclusions from?

- Restating the main idea to get it out of the way
- Restating the sub topics to reacquaint myself with the larger structure of my paper
- The final thoughts so I have something to work toward with the first part of my conclusion

Expand: Structuring the Conclusion

Overview: Concise Structure
While it is relatively straightforward, getting started on your conclusion can be tough if you aren't quite sure how to structure it. Although this can vary depending on the length and type of the paper you are writing, you will generally want your conclusion to be as concise and to the point as possible. Because of this, knowing how to structure a conclusion will help you make decisions on what you need to conclude your paper effectively.

Revisiting and Restatement
Most conclusions will begin by immediately restating the main idea or thesis of the paper. Again, it is best to think of this not as repetition but as revisiting the main purpose of the paper in order to bring your reader’s attention to the wider scope of the paper. Restatement means rewriting your thesis statement in a way that is conclusive, not merely copying the statement word for word. You want to re-engage your reader with your main idea, but in a way that leads them to understand that you are wrapping up your discussion, rather than restarting it. This should be your first sentence or two.

In much the same way, you will next revisit the main subtopics of your paper, reminding your reader of the overall structure and nature of your discussion, while also showing through this reminder the strength of your discussion. In other words, the point here is to show your reader how everything that you have covered in your discussion ties together, and how each point strengthens your main idea. This section should take about as many sentences as there are subtopics in your paper; however, these points can also be covered in one sentence, so long as it is not too unwieldy.
Final Thoughts and Impact

Your final sentences should be dedicated to impacting your reader, as has been covered earlier. It’s important not to let this part of your conclusion overwhelm your reader’s impression of your main idea. Don’t let yourself get started on a tangent from your central thesis that distracts from your paper. Rather, your final thoughts should be one or two sentences that offer a way for your reader to think about your idea in a way that relates to them.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Writing a Developed and Detailed Conclusion

- A basic model for a conclusion with an example
- https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/common_writing_assignments/argument_papers/conclusions.html
- Source: Online Writing Lab, Purdue University

Writing Effective Conclusions

- Practical advice and more suggestions for final statements
- http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/conclude.html
- Source: Writing Center, University of Richmond

Ending the Essay: Conclusions

- Practical advice about writing effective, discussion-based conclusions
- https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/ending-essay-conclusions
- Source: Harvard College Writing Center

Lesson Glossary

**hypothesis**: a proposed explanation for a phenomena that is then tested in a scientific experiment

**rhetoric**: the strategic use of language to persuade or affect an audience

**thesis**: the main idea of a paper

Check Your Knowledge

1. In order to leave your reader with the maximum impact of your discussion, you should use difficult, complex language in your conclusion.
   A. True
   B. False

2. Repetition in your conclusion paragraph is bad.
   A. True
   B. False

3. The goal of any conclusion, no matter what kind of paper you are writing, is to leave a strong impression on your reader and to make sure that they understand what you’ve been writing about.
   A. True
B. False
Answer Key:
1. B  2. B  3. A

Citations

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