

UNIVERSITY WRITING PROGRAM

CONSTRUCTING EFFECTIVE CONCLUSIONS

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Though the final paragraph in an essay is commonly referred to as the conclusion, it is not traditionally the place in which the author draws new conclusions that were not mentioned previously in the essay. Rather, the goal of an essay's conclusion is to bring the paper full circle by revisiting the large-scale ideas stated in the introduction, but with the refined perspective created by the preceding arguments in the body of the paper. Conclusions often return to the thesis—which the preceding essay has attempted to make compelling—in an attempt to briefly assess its significance in some larger context.

Conceptual Components

Revisiting the Thesis:

Just as the preceding body paragraphs attempted to draw more general conclusions from specific pieces of evidence, the concluding paragraph of an essay reestablishes the essay's overall argument using the more specific claims argued in the body. Though the thesis is generally reintroduced the first sentence in the conclusion, the remainder of the paragraph should be used to ensure that this return to the thesis moves beyond simply reproducing the introduction.

Recontextualization:

Just as your introduction acts as a bridge that transports your readers from their own lives into the textual space of your analysis, your conclusion provides a bridge to help your readers make the transition back to their daily lives. This is done most effectively by emphasizing a context for your ideas that makes them relevant or meaningful for your reader. In some cases, this context may be different from the one established in your conclusion, and it may push slightly beyond the boundaries of the writing prompt.

Structural Components

Evolved Thesis:

Many strong conclusions restate the thesis—in different language from the introduction—in the opening sentence. This allows the concluding paragraph to establish something more than the introduction in which the thesis is usually stated near the end. Restating the paper's overall argument at the beginning of the conclusion allows for a brief exploration of your essay's context or broader implications in the final paragraph.

Motive (with a twist):

In guiding your readers out of the textual space of your paper, it is important to remind them why your arguments are significant. You don't want your readers to finish your paper thinking "so what?" To prevent this, use your conclusion to reestablish the relevance of your thesis.

Limitations:

Acknowledging the limitations of your argument, while optional, can be an effective way of clarifying the scope of your thesis, particularly in an essay whose claims are rather ambitious. Acknowledging that there are questions that need further research or that your argument is unlikely to convince those who approach the topic with a different set of assumptions is also a useful strategy for bolstering your credibility.

Look Ahead:

Because an essay is but a small part of a larger discourse on its topic, it is important to describe how your conclusion may serve as a steppingstone for further research. Implicitly you are saying, "Now that I have proven the thesis of my essay, what new questions can we ask about this topic?" In a way, looking ahead to a new question does the work of the three previous components: proposing new areas of inquiry reinforces that you have proven your *thesis*; showing that, with further research, your claims could have broader implications *remotivates* your argument; acknowledging that other questions still remain acknowledges the *limitations* of your central claim.

Final thought:

Since it is the last thing they will read, you want your final sentence to stick in your readers' minds. Whether you choose to end with emphasis, wit, or wonder, your final sentence should be in some way memorable without departing significantly from the overall tone of your essay.

Credit: University Writing Program, Brandeis University, 2020.

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