

Concluding Paragraphs

Concluding paragraphs, like opening paragraphs, are especially difficult if only because they are so conspicuous. Fortunately, you are not always obliged to write one. Purely descriptive essays, for example, may end merely with a final paragraph, not with a paragraph that draws a conclusion. In an expository essay explaining a process or mechanism, you may simply stop when you have finished. Just check to see that the last sentence is a good one, clear and vigorous, and stop. In such essays there is usually no need for a crescendo signaling your farewell to the reader. Persuasive essays are more likely to need concluding paragraphs, not merely final paragraphs. But even persuasive essays, if they are short enough, may end without a formal conclusion; if the last paragraph sets forth the last step of the argument, that may be conclusion enough.

Let's assume, however, that you do feel the need to write a concluding paragraph. With conclusions, as with introductions, try to say something interesting. It is not of the slightest interest to say "Thus we see..." and then echo your title and first paragraph. There is some justification for a summary at the end of a long paper because the reader may have half forgotten some of the ideas presented thirty pages earlier, but a paper that can easily be held in the mind needs something different. A good concluding paragraph does more than provide an echo of what the writer has already said. It rounds out the previous discussion, normally with a few sentences that summarize (without the obviousness of "We may now summarize"), but it also may draw an inference that has not previously been expressed. To draw such an inference is not to introduce a new idea—a concluding paragraph is hardly the place for a new idea—but is to see the previous material in a fresh perspective. You may find it useful to answer the imaginary question "So what?" at the end of your paper. Put the issue in a larger perspective. A good concluding paragraph closes the issue while enriching it. For example, an essay on being assaulted and robbed ends with these two paragraphs:

What do they take when they rob you? Maybe a thousand dollars' worth of stuff. A car. A jar of pennies and small change—the jar, which they would probably end up breaking, worth more than the change inside. A portable radio bought years before at an Army PX. Little things that it takes days to discover are missing.

And what else? The ability to easily enter a darkened apartment or to freely open the door after going out. The worst loss is the sense of private space, whether it's in your head or your home, and you can never be certain it will not be invaded again.

—Charles Powers

Powers moves from the theft of material objects to the psychological implications of the theft, that is, to a more profound kind of robbery. This is not a new topic because the idea is implicit throughout a discussion of assault and robbery and so it enlarges rather than abandons the topic. It is just that Powers is explicitly stating the idea for the first time.

One hesitates to offer a do-it-yourself kit for final paragraphs, but the following simple devices often work:

1. End with a quotation, especially a quotation that amplifies or enlarges a quotation used in the opening paragraph.

2. End with some idea or detail from the beginning of the essay and thus bring it full circle.

3. End with an allusion, say to a historical or mythological figure or event, putting your topic in a larger framework.

4. End with a glance at the reader—not with a demand that she mount the barricades, but with a suggestion that the next move is hers.

If you adopt any of these devices, do so quietly; the aim is not to write a grand finale, but to complete or round out a discussion.

Here are two concluding paragraphs; notice how they wrap things up and at the same time open out by suggesting a larger frame of reference. The first example, from a student's essay on Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, includes quotations from the book and an allusion to a common expression.

Both worlds, youthful anarchy and repressive government, are undesirable. For while "you can't run a country with every chelloveck comporting himself in Alex's manner of the night," there should never be a government with the power to "turn you into something other than a human being...with no power of choice any longer." What is frightening is that there is no apparent solution to this futuristic society's dilemma. In face, with the friendly alliance of Alex and the Minister of the Interior at the end of the book come hints that society may soon enjoy the worst of both worlds.

The second is a concluding paragraph from a student's essay on *Black Elk Speaks*, the life story of an Oglala Sioux holy man. The paragraph includes quotations, and then goes on to suggest that the rest is up to the reader.

"Truth comes into this world with two faces. One is sad with suffering and the other laughs; but it is the same face." The terrible tragedy of the Indian people can never fully be undone. Their "hoop is broken, and there is no center anymore." But perhaps the rising circulation of Black Elk's story will inspire people to look more closely into person-to-person and person-to-nature relationships. Black Elk's message "was given to him for all men and it is true and it is beautiful," but it must be listened to, understood, and acted on.

All essayists will have to find their own ways of ending each essay; the four strategies here are common, but they are not for you if you don't find them comfortable. And so, rather than ending with more rules about how to end essays, I suggest rather how not to end them: don't merely summarize, don't say "in conclusion," don't introduce a totally new point, and don't apologize.