

Conclusions

Some possible approaches to conclusions:

- Set your discussion into a different, perhaps larger, context.
- Consider the implications or outcomes of your argument (“so what?”).
- Offer opinions that your reader might or might not have accepted earlier.
- Propose a course of action.
- Try to solve a problem you have raised.
- Link the last paragraph to the first, perhaps by reiterating a word, phrase, reference or idea you used at the beginning.
- Use a quotation that amplifies your main point or puts it in a different perspective.

Don'ts:

- Don't simply summarize your essay
- Avoid phrases like "in conclusion," "to conclude," "in summary," and "to sum up"

So much is at stake in writing a conclusion. This is, after all, your last chance to persuade your readers to your point of view and to impress yourself upon them as a writer and thinker. The impression you create in your conclusion will shape the impression that stays with your readers after they've finished the essay.

The end of an essay should therefore convey a sense of completeness and closure as well as a sense of the lingering possibilities of the topic, its larger meaning, and its implications. The final paragraph should close the discussion without closing it off.

Here are some possible approaches in writing conclusions (this list is by no means exhaustive):

- **Establish a sense of closure in your essay by linking the last paragraph to the first, perhaps by reiterating a word, phrase, reference or idea you used at the beginning:**

For example:

INTRODUCTION: Benjamin Franklin once said that the key to health and happiness was "moderation in everything." Indeed, we can see how true Franklin's philosophy is in the story of the tortoise and the hare. In the competition between the tortoise and the hare it is being "slow and steady," in other words moderate and consistent, that ultimately wins the race. By following a "slow and steady" course, the tortoise does gain health and happiness, while the hare's immoderate nature leads to his downfall.

CONCLUSION: Not only does the tortoise win the race, but his fame leads to a movie contract, while the hare's immoderate behavior gets him a prison sentence. Which would you rather do: end up in the movies, or in prison? If you prefer to be a movie star rather than a convict, then according to the story of the tortoise and the hare you should embrace Benjamin Franklin's philosophy of moderation. But be careful, because expecting moderation to make you into a movie star may be immoderate itself.

- **Conclude with a quotation from or reference to a primary or secondary source, one that amplifies your main point or puts it in a different perspective. A quotation from, say, the novel or poem you're writing about can add texture and specificity to your discussion; a critic or scholar can help confirm or complicate your final point:**

For instance, you might conclude an essay on the idea of home in James Joyce's short story collection, *Dubliners*, with information about Joyce's own complex feelings towards Dublin, his home. Or you might end with a biographer's statement about Joyce's attitude toward Dublin, which could illuminate his characters' responses to the city. Just be cautious, especially about using secondary material: make sure that you get the last word. You want to leave your reader with your ideas and words rather than letting someone else take your essay over in the end.

- **Conclude by setting your discussion into a different, perhaps larger, context:**

For example:

"The Simpsons" has a great impact on its viewers, making the show a part of America's collective consciousness. While the Simpsons themselves have both positive and negative qualities, these negative qualities—these flaws—make them more human to us, more believable as a family. The positive qualities they exhibit, although not always as prevalent, give us both hope and make us believe in the goodness of modern humankind. We watch the Simpsons because they are a reflection of ourselves with all of our quirkiness and imperfections, the negativity in each show not so much causing us to think of and feel evil or malice, but adding to the general enjoying and providing material that leads to the discussion of a moral.

- **Conclude by redefining one of the key terms of your argument:**

For instance, an essay on Marx's treatment of the conflict between wage labor and capital might begin with Marx's claim that the "capitalist economy is . . . a gigantic enterprise of *dehumanization*"; the essay might end by suggesting that Marxist analysis is itself dehumanizing because it construes everything in economic rather than moral or ethical terms.

- **Conclude by considering the implications or outcomes of your argument (or analysis or discussion):**

What does your argument imply, or involve, or suggest? For instance, an essay on the novel *Ambiguous Adventure*, by the Senegalese writer Cheikh Hamidou Kane, might open with the idea that the protagonist's development suggests Kane's belief in the need to integrate Western materialism and Sufi spirituality in modern Senegal. The conclusion might make the new but related point that the novel on the whole suggests that such an integration is (or isn't) possible.

- **Conclude by offering opinions that your reader might or might not have accepted earlier:**

For example:

So what are we to do in such a dangerous world? While our access to the Internet seems like any other natural right, it in fact carries a great deal of responsibility. And as much as we would like to extend that responsibility to everyone, we must realize that not everyone has the experience to act reasonably in such a dangerous domain. Currently we restrict the right to vote to persons over the age of 18 and the right to drink alcohol to persons over the age of 21, since we assume they are not ready to sensibly partake in these activities. We live in a time when freedom is more precious than ever. It is natural to want to extend freedoms and rights to as many people as possible, but we have to think of their safety. Just as no one has the right to put others' lives in danger—in a car on the freeway or a plane in the sky—children should not have unmonitored access to the internet if they are endangering themselves. We must help minors help themselves.

- **Conclude by proposing a course of action:**

For example:

Challenges to homophobia and the rigidity of gender roles must go beyond the visible lesbian and gay movement. Lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals alone cannot defuse the power of stigmatization and the license it gives to frighten, wound, or kill. Literally millions of us are needed on this front, straight and gay alike. We invite any heterosexual unwilling to live with the damage that "real men" or "real women" messages wreak on them, on their children, and on lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals to join us. We ask that you not let queer jokes go unchallenged at work, at home, in the media, or anywhere. We ask that you foster in your children a genuine respect for themselves and their right to be who and what they wish to be, regardless of their gender...We ask that you invite your lesbian, gay, and bisexual friends and relatives into the routine of your lives without demanding silence or discretion from them...We ask that you stand with us in public demonstrations to demand our right to live as free people, without fear. We ask that you respect our dignity by acting to end the poison of homophobia" (Vasquez 165).

- **Try to solve a problem you have raised:**

For example:

If young children do not realize that their parents speak from firsthand experience of their own youth, how can parents convince their children of their wisdom? The answer lies in the trust that must be established in the family. If children have learned to trust their folks, they will heed them, whether or not they understand the source of their knowledge.

Finally, some advice on how not to end an essay:

- **Don't simply summarize your essay.** A brief summary of your argument may be useful, especially if your essay is long, more than ten pages or so. But shorter essays tend not to require a restatement of your main ideas.
- **Avoid phrases like "in conclusion," "to conclude," "in summary," and "to sum up."** These phrases can be useful, even welcome, in oral presentations. But readers can see, by the telltale compression of the pages, when an essay is about to end. You'll irritate your audience if you belabor the obvious.
- **Resist the urge to apologize.** If you've immersed yourself in your subject, you now know a good deal more about it than you can possibly include in a five- or ten- or 20-page essay. As a result, by the time you've finished writing, you may be having some doubts about what you've produced. (And if you haven't immersed yourself in your subject, you may be feeling even more doubtful about your essay as you approach the conclusion.) Repress those doubts. Don't undercut your authority by saying things like, "this is just one approach to the subject; there may be other, better approaches. . ."

Some material taken from Pat Bellanca, for the Writing Center at Harvard University, 1998

<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/Conclusions.html>