

Conclusions

After reading this handout, you should be able to understand how conclusions function, determine whether a writing strategy is effective or unhelpful, and evaluate conclusion drafts.

About Conclusions

Introductions and conclusions can be the most difficult parts of papers to write. An effective introduction should essentially let the reader know, “this is what I’m going to talk about” or “This is what my paper will discuss.” Similarly, a conclusion should remind your reader “this is what I said.” While the body paragraphs are often easier to write, your paper needs an introduction and conclusion to frame your thoughts and bridge your ideas for the reader.

Your introduction acts as a bridge that transports your readers from their own lives into the “place” of your analysis. Your conclusion can provide a bridge to help your readers make the transition back to their daily lives. Your conclusion should help readers see why all your analysis and information matters even after they put the paper down.

Your conclusion allows you to have the final say on the issues you have raised in your paper. A strong conclusion will do the following:

- **Synthesize** your thoughts
- **Demonstrate** the importance of your ideas
- **Propel your reader** to a new view of the subject
- **Make a good final impression** by ending on a positive note

Your conclusion can go beyond the confines of the assignment. It allows you to consider broader issues, make new connections, and elaborate on the significance of your findings.

Your conclusion gives your reader something to take away that will help them see things differently or appreciate your topic in personally relevant ways. It can suggest broader implications that may enrich your reader's life in some way.

Strategies for Writing Effective Conclusions

Try the following strategies to help you write an effective conclusion:

- **Ask a Friend to Play the “So What” Game.** Whenever you make a statement from your conclusion, ask the friend to say, “So what?” or “Why should anybody care?” Try to answer these questions in your conclusion. For example:

You: *Basically, I'm just saying that education was important to Douglass.*

Friend: *So what?*

You: *Well, it was important because it was a key to him feeling like a free and equal citizen.*

Friend: *Why should anybody care?*

You: *That's important because plantation owners tried to keep slaves from being educated so that they could maintain control. When Douglass obtained an education, he undermined that control personally.*

You can also use this strategy on your own, asking yourself “So What?” as you develop your ideas or your draft.

- **Return to the theme(s) in the introduction.** This strategy brings the reader full circle. Beginning and ending a paper with the same scenario can create new understandings. You may also use key words, parallel concepts, or images that you also used in the introduction.
- **Synthesize, don't summarize.** Briefly mention your paper's main points, but don't simply repeat things that were in your paper. Instead, show your reader how the points you made fit together with your examples.
- **Include a provocative insight or quotation** from the research or reading you did for your paper.
- **Propose a course of action, a solution to an issue, or questions for further study.** This can redirect your reader's thought process, helping him or her apply your info and ideas to her own life or to see the broader implications.
- **Point to broader implications.** For example, if your paper examines the Greensboro sit-ins or another event in the Civil Rights Movement, point out its impact on the

Civil Rights Movement as a whole. For example, a paper about Virginia Woolf's writing style could point to her influence on other writers and feminists.

Recognizing Unhelpful Strategies

Avoid strategies that do the following:

- **Begin with an unnecessary, overused phrase** (“in conclusion,” “in summary,” or “in closing”). These phrases may work in speeches, yet they come across as trite in writing.
- **State the thesis for the very first time** in the conclusion.
- **Introduce a new idea or subtopic** in your conclusion.
- **End with a rephrased thesis statement without any substantive changes.**
- **Make sentimental, emotional appeals** that are out of character with an analytical paper.
- **Include evidence** (quotations, statistics, etc.) that should be in the body of the paper.

Four Kinds of Ineffective Conclusions

1. **The “That’s My Story and I’m Sticking to It” Conclusion.** This conclusion just restates the thesis and is usually painfully short. It does not push ideas forward. People write this kind of conclusion when they can’t think of anything else to say.
 - **Example:** In conclusion, Frederick Douglass was, as we have seen, a pioneer in American education, proving that education was a major force for social change with regard to slavery.
2. **The “Sherlock Holmes” Conclusion.** Sometimes writers will state the thesis for the very first time in the conclusion because they don’t want to give everything away too early. It may seem dramatic to keep the reader in the dark until the end and then “wow” him or her with a main idea (similar to a Sherlock Holmes mystery), yet the reader is expecting an analytical discussion of your topic in an academic style. Your main argument (thesis) should be stated up front.
 - **Example:** (After a paper that lists numerous incidents but never says what these incidents reveal about Douglass and his views on education): So, as the evidence above demonstrates, Douglass saw education as a way to undermine the slaveholders’ power and also an important step toward freedom.
3. **The “America the Beautiful”/“I Am Woman”/“We Shall Overcome” Conclusion.** This conclusion draws on emotional appeal. While this emotion and even sentimentality may be very heartfelt, it is usually out of character with an analytical paper. Try to avoid emotional praise in order to create a more fitting tribute to the topic.
 - **Example:** Because of the efforts of fine Americans like Frederick Douglass, countless others have seen the shining beacon of light that is education. His example was a torch that lit the way for others. Frederick Douglass was truly an American hero.
4. **The “Grab Bag” Conclusion.** This conclusion includes extra information that the writer couldn’t integrate into the main paper. It can be hard to leave out details that were

discovered after hours of research and thought, but adding random facts and bits of evidence at the end of an otherwise-well-organized essay creates confusion.

- **Example:** In addition to being an educational pioneer, Frederick Douglass provides an interesting case study for masculinity in the American South. He also offers historians an interesting glimpse into slave resistance when he confronts Covey, the overseer. His relationships with female relatives reveal the importance of family in the slave community.

This article originally appeared as a handout from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center.