

Conclusions

The conclusion of an essay is often the most difficult part to write. It should bring closure to the paper *and* deliver the sense that something significant has been discussed that points beyond the essay itself. It is an opportunity to make an interesting elaboration or extension of your argument. It should never feel tacked on or perfunctory.

Your conclusion should avoid either merely summarizing what the essay has argued or making a grand, sweeping statement far beyond the substance of the essay. An effective conclusion navigates between these two extremes.

Here are four ways to approach your conclusion:

1. **Elaborate on the meaning of your argument.** The conclusion should briefly restate the main argument, focusing on the *insights* the argument provided, not on everything the essay covered. Signs that your conclusion might only be summary:
 - Begins with a claim like “In conclusion, I argued...”
 - Uses words such as “obviously” — these suggest that the conclusion is bringing nothing new to the essay.
2. **Extensions of the argument.** One way to push your conclusion beyond summary is to follow the brief restatement of the argument’s insights with a reflection on the *significance* of the argument. What can we understand better or think clearer about after reading your essay? Articulate concrete connections.
 - *Avoid the belated realization.* This strategy almost always backfires because the new, surprising idea is often tangential to your argument and may even contradict it.
 - *Avoid overly grand or universal declarations.* Certainly your essay will be dealing with important ideas that have a long history and future in the humanities, but your essay is not in a position to make grand declarations about the way that humanity and the world actually are.

Ex. It appears that Marx is right, and the workers’ revolution is inevitable. Perhaps we will see it in the coming century.
 - *Extend your argument by one degree of significance.* This strategy helps keep the connections clear and concrete. Here are three ways to make such connections:
 - Significance of your argument for the text or its cultural context.

Ex. The complex role of women in *Beowulf*, discussed in this essay, shows how the Anglo-Saxon warrior culture depended on women to maintain social stability in the midst of the constant turmoil of war.

- Significance in comparison to another text in the course.

Ex. Plato's reasons for rejecting the art of persuasion, discussed in this essay, help us understand why some Athenian texts, such as Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, cast the Homeric hero, Odysseus, as immoral.

- Significance in comparison to a present norm, tradition, or idea.

Ex. Stoicism's focus on virtue seems to have been replaced in contemporary culture with a focus on happiness. Surprisingly, even though they appear to share different goals, the Stoic practices directed toward virtue closely resemble the modern practices of mindfulness.

3. **Use the response to the counterargument as your conclusion.** Sometimes your counterargument challenges a significant point in your thesis, and so the refutation of the counterargument will naturally engage with the argument's big picture. In such cases, an effective response to the counterargument can also function as a good conclusion to the essay. It reminds the reader of the argument's main claim and should reveal in the course of the response a further insight or significance of the argument. *See the section on Counterarguments.*

4. **Reflect on points that remain to be decided.** Humanities essays deal with complex texts and important ideas in intellectual history. It is impossible for a short paper to resolve all of the outstanding issues. You can use this ongoing debate to reflect on the issues that the text and your essay leave the reader thinking about.

Ex. While this essay has shown how Conrad understands European civilization's moral failures, there is no solution to them in *Heart of Darkness*. There are solutions proposed by Marlow, by the Africans, and by Kurtz, but none of them manages to escape the impenetrable darkness.

Warning: It is easy for this strategy to backfire. It is essential that what remains to be decided is *not* the topic of your thesis. That is, the ambiguity or irresolution should be a purposeful part of the text, as in the example above. The irresolution should *not* be a product of your own understanding or ambivalence as in the following example:

Ex. Perhaps Conrad really thinks that one of the proposed solutions to the moral failures of European civilization is the right one, but we will never know.