

Effective Conclusions

The conclusion of a paper is often the most difficult part to write. It is certainly the most difficult part to make rules about, because every paper is different, and the conclusion one uses depends on the paper one has written. But here are some suggestions.

It is seldom a good idea to use the sort of concluding paragraph that begins, "In conclusion, we see that . . ." This has an air of desperation about it--perhaps an air of desperate boredom. It means that a summary is coming; nothing new and interesting will be said. In a long work, or an especially complicated one, a summary can be valuable; in a short, clearly argued paper, it can be deadly.

There are other forms of anticlimax, which should also be avoided. An especially popular one is the belated realization, a sudden idea that is not supported by the preceding discussion, or that even contradicts it--as when, for example, one concludes a vigorous argument about the nature of fate in Homer's Iliad by writing, "Personally, I think that Homer himself couldn't decide what fate was. Sometimes the gods are subject to fate; sometimes the gods determine fate. It's not really clear; it depends on your subjective point of view."

The following methods of concluding do not exhaust the possibilities, but they are likely to be more effective than the ones just mentioned. Nevertheless, remember that there is no set formula for a conclusion; it all depends on the argument you have constructed in the rest of the paper.

1. Before writing your essay, list the arguments you will use and decide which one is most powerful. Place your best argument last; in a short paper, this will provide a natural climax, and there will obviously be no need to try to produce an emphatic conclusion by summarizing points you have already made.
2. On the basis of your argument, have you any provocative suggestions to make? It is easy to make such suggestions when you are considering practical issues:

The lesson to be learned from these facts is obvious: the State Department ought to do everything possible to promote better relations with Bulgaria.

But even when you are not dealing with the burning questions of the hour, you can still make suggestions:

These facts lead me to believe that Euripides' work has much more to teach us about moral issues than does Sophocles'.

3. Point out the significance of the information you have presented:

The nature of the Greek city state, as I have described it, must be clearly understood if one is to appreciate Sophocles' tragedies.

4. Mention any points that remain to be decided. In Humanities we consider issues that have been of great importance in intellectual history. But really important issues often cannot be wrapped up in neat packages and filed away in manila envelopes. If they were easy to settle once and for all, they would already have been settled, and intellectual history would have stopped. So, writers often show intelligence and candor by concluding their discussions of unresolved issues in such a way as this:

It is not clear that any solution exists to the last of the moral problems that Conrad considers in Heart of Darkness. Several solutions are suggested--by Marlow, by the Africans, by Kurtz himself--but, for the reasons I have indicated, none of these solutions seems adequate. The adequate solution, if there is one, lies buried in the heart's impenetrable darkness.

But: The author of this conclusion has already supplied reasons for the paper's failure **to solve a certain problem. If the author had not done so, this kind of conclusion would not work. Every conclusion needs to be supported by the arguments of the paper that contains it.** Make sure to distinguish the kind of conclusion exemplified above--which shows that the author has done the work, analyzed the text carefully, considered the opposing views, and still found some element of mystery or ambiguity--from belated realization or merely giving up, as in the following:

Of course, Conrad may mean something else entirely. I just can't tell what we are supposed to gather from a lot of the scenes he writes, so it's very hard to say what the secret of life is from his point of view.

5. Sometimes an essay can be rounded off by showing how ideas from a text you have studied previously can apply to your current discussion. For example:

Thucydides' idea about the logic of empire--that one nation's rule requires mistreatment of subject peoples--might help us to understand Aeneas' abandonment of Dido and his subjugation of Latinus.

Don't let such comparisons get out of control, as they are very apt to do. Make sure that they are important in themselves, and that you show a real and significant relationship between them and the subject of the paper. They must never degenerate into elements that are merely tacked on.