Conclusions: How Do I End?

In most genres of writing, a concluding paragraph reminds readers where they’ve been and invites them to carry your ideas forward. This is your opportunity to reiterate your key points, but how you do that can vary a great deal depending on the genre in which you are writing. Regardless of genre, a strong conclusion also leaves your readers with some inspiration or motivation to continue thinking about what you have written.

**Know Your Genre**

For many kinds of writing, such as persuasive arguments, you want to reiterate your main claims without simply summarizing them. But there are also genres in which summarizing your main points is exactly what your audience will expect you to do, such as when you are writing a research report. Instructors can often guide you toward effective ways to conclude a specific piece of writing, but don’t forget that you can also seek out mentor texts that are in the same genre as yours to see how they conclude their work.

**The First of the Last: Starting a Conclusion**

Before you begin drafting your conclusion and reiterating your key points, consider the following questions to help you home in on a purpose to tie your argument together for your audience:

What have I contributed here?

How has my work helped to resolve or create a better understanding of the original problem?

What are the broader implications of my research, ideas, or argument?

Your reader will expect clear, unambiguous answers to these questions, and answering them is often a good way to start drafting your conclusion, even if these answers don’t end up in your final draft.

**Weaving Key Points into a Greater Narrative**

Keeping in mind that conclusions can be quite different between genres, here is some advice that is applicable to most (but not all) kinds of writing you’ll be doing in college. One of your conclusion’s primary jobs is to take your reader from the narrow, specific focus of your paper back into a relevant context. For something like a political argument, it is usually appropriate to describe the implications of your specific claims for society at large (say, Texas, the United States, or perhaps even the world). In other genres, your broader context may still be fairly small in scope. For example, your conclusion may discuss the implications your argument has for a specific academic field, like Civil Engineering or Botany. When reiterating your points here, you can focus on their relevance and impact to your intended audience.

The following excerpt is from the end of an article arguing that the boomer generation is holding back younger generations in several ways. Notice that after weaving her key points into a greater narrative, the author also issues a **Call to Action**, which can be an effective conclusion strategy.

The remedy is easy to prescribe—and hard to enact. Governments should unleash the young by cutting the red tape that keeps them out of jobs, and curbing the power of property-owners to stop homes from being built. They should scrap restrictions on domestic migration and allow more cross-border movement. They should make education a priority.

It is a lot to expect from political leaders who often seem unequal to the task of even modest reform. But every parent and grandparent has a stake in this, too. If they put their shoulders to the wheel, who knows what they might accomplish. (Source: "Young, Gifted and Held Back." *The Economist*, January 23, 2016.)

**Conclude with Strength: Tried and True Strategies**

Below is a list of some common concluding strategies to end your writing with a bang, accompanied by annotated examples to show you how they work. This is not an exhaustive list.

**Discuss the Implications of Your Argument**

These results, then, confirm that what constrains an individual’s number of friends is neurological. Even though social networks like Facebook could help people handle far more social interactions than Dunbar’s number describes, it seems the human brain simply cannot keep up. (Source: "Done, Bar the Counting." *The Economist*, January 23, 2016.)

By considering the context of social media, this article wraps up its argument about of the neurological limit to the number of relationships humans can maintain. In so doing, it discusses the implications for the reader.

**Tell an Anecdote that Illustrates a Key Point**

Not long ago, an English writer telephoned me from London, asking questions. One was, “What’s your alma mater?” I told him, “Books.” You will never catch me with a free fifteen minutes in which I’m not studying something I feel might be able to help the black man. (Source: X, Malcolm, and Alex Haley. 1965. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Grove Press.)

In this excerpt from his autobiography, Malcolm X explains the critical source of knowledge that books became for him. Although his concluding anecdote is barely over two lines long, it both encapsulates his key point and helps his reader understand its significance. In a short space, this anecdote manages to tell us that reading is a powerful tool, a central part of Malcom X’s life, and a method “to help the black man” overcome systemic racism.

**Describe a Key Image**

The crew of the space shuttle Challenger honored us by the manner in which they lived their lives. We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, this morning, as they prepared for their journey and waved goodbye and "slipped the surly bonds of earth" to "touch the face of God.”
(Source: Reagan, Ronald. "Explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger Address to the Nation." Speech, The White House, Washington, DC, January 28, 1986.)

In this short speech, which Reagan addressed to Americans watching on TV and listening on the radio, Reagan both eulogized the lost astronauts aboard *Challenger* and also reiterated America’s dedication to a free, pioneering spirit that would not diminish even in the face of tragedy. Reagan’s vivid description of the astronauts leaving earth behind to “Touch the face of God” drives home this dual purpose of remembering those lost and carrying their legacy of exploration forward. The evocative nature of the image makes the emotion behind his message all the more poignant.

**Other Strategies to Consider**

Here are a few other commonly used methods to conclude with strength.

* Issue a call to action
* Explain the applications of your argument
* Make recommendations
* Speculate about the future
* Offer a quotation that expresses the essence of your argument
* Ask a rhetorical question
* Reflect on the limitations of your argument (this strategy is commonly used in the sociology and anthropology fields)

Credits:

Lester Faigley, *The Penguin Handbook*, 3rd Edition

John M. Swales, *Research Genres: Explorations and Applications*