

## Writing An Effective Conclusion

The dreaded conclusion! What do you say? You've said everything, already. You've stated your argument. You've proved it. You're done, right? Your mind says *yes*, but your gut says *no*. Listen to your gut. You're not done yet. But, the question remains: *What do I say?*

Let's start with what you don't want to say.

- *Don't begin with a phrase like "in conclusion," "in summary," or "in closing."*

Clearly, this is the last paragraph of your essay. The reader knows what you're doing in a conclusion. Phrases like these tend to benefit you, the writer; they launch you into the writing of the paragraph. But they're meaningless.

- *Don't state the thesis for the first time in the conclusion.*

It should go without saying, but the thesis statement belongs at the beginning of your essay.

- *Don't introduce new ideas, evidence, or subtopics in your conclusion.*

The conclusion is not the place for new information. If you introduce new material in the conclusion, you'll create doubts in your readers' minds. Your conclusion shouldn't need any new evidence to be effective. If it does, this is a symptom of a larger problem with your essay—most likely, that you haven't proved your argument effectively in the body paragraphs.

- *Don't conclude with a rephrased thesis statement.*

The thesis belongs in the introduction. The body of your essay will prove your thesis. To be effective, the conclusion does *not* require a rephrased thesis statement. By the time your readers reach the conclusion, they should know what your argument is and understand how and why it's valid. A conclusion should emphasize the importance of your thesis statement, but not restate it. More on this point below.

### An effective conclusion will do three things well.

- 1) It will leave a strong final impression on the reader,
- 2) Give your essay a sense of completeness, and
- 3) Most importantly, it will emphasize the importance of your thesis statement.

Think of your essay's argument as a kind of currency. Your conclusion, then, must prove the value of that currency. To put it another way, you've walked your readers through the logic of your argument; you've explored and proved the various facets of it paragraph by paragraph. Now your readers need to know why your particular argument matters and how it can be applied to the world at large. For example, if you've claimed in your thesis statement that the truly heroic characters in Modernist literature are usually misunderstood and assumed not to be heroes by their peers, and if you've proved this argument in the body

of your essay, then you should explain why this argument is **valuable** in the conclusion, why it **matters** to readers of Modernist literature. Below is an example of such an essay.

*Final Sentences of the Opening Paragraph, plus Thesis Statement:*

[...] These three characters are widely recognized as being heroes of Modernist literature, but others have not been so well-received. Two, in particular, deserve the same heroic status: Robert Cohn of The Sun Also Rises and Darl Bundren of As I Lay Dying. Within the context of these novels, the fact that Robert and Darl are despised by those closest to them proves their status as heroes, and it is critical to the meaning of both novels that they be understood as such.

*The Conclusion:*

Readers of Modernist literature bear the responsibility of thinking critically about all of the characters in a given story, especially those portrayed as outsiders, as cowardly or insane. Since it is a convention of Modern authors to use first-person narrators, readers should understand that the judgments of those narrators are imperfect and often self-serving. The main characters in The Sun Also Rises and As I Lay Dying choose to interpret the actions of Robert Cohn and Darl Bundren in ways that serve their own purposes, that disturb the surface of their lives the least. When reading such novels, one must remember that the classical rubric does not apply. All that the narrator says cannot be taken for granted. Since it is the condition of Modern heroes to exist in conflict with their own societies, it is also sometimes their condition to be embedded within a text, to be the subject of the narrator's personal biases. If a reader does not approach Modern texts with this caveat in mind, he or she might misunderstand the author's true intentions, might not realize that characters like Robert Cohn and Darl Bundren epitomize the Modern hero.

*What can we take from this example?*

It reminds the readers of the argument without restating or summarizing it at great length. While you don't want to summarize, exclusively, it's important to touch on your central argument. Once you've done this, you can emphasize why your argument is important, why it matters—not just on a small scale, but also on a larger one. Readers of this essay will understand the author's argument as it relates to the two novels in question, and they will also appreciate how the argument applies to all of Modernist literature. Knowing this, your readers will perceive greater value in your essay's currency, and this is precisely what you want to achieve with your conclusion.