

CONCLUSIONS

A paper's conclusion typically accomplishes four things:

It gives the reader a sense of closure. This is essential. The reader who turns over the page expecting to keep reading after your conclusion is “finished” will leave your paper feeling uncomfortable and dissatisfied.

It emphasizes your thesis. This is equally essential for the success of your essay. You probably stated your main point at the end of your introduction, but—whether you did or not—your reader certainly expects to see it here. If you've said it before, though, you'll want to use different words this time.

It recaps your main points. This doesn't mean that you should simply restate the topic sentences of each paragraph or section, but it does mean that you should outline your fundamental argument: X is true because of Y and Z.

It offers your reader something to consider. This is tricky. You don't want to start a whole new topic in your conclusion, but you do want to give the readers something that will reward them for sticking with you and reading this paragraph. That often involves offering a new question, quotation or fact that's closely related to the argument you've already made.

A successful conclusion **never** undercuts the points the writer has already made. It **never** contains phrases like “of course, this is only my opinion,” or “then again, other people might feel differently.”

How long does a conclusion have to be? It varies, but most are single paragraphs of roughly the same length as your paper's body paragraphs: often 5-7 sentences, 80-120 words. In very long papers, concluding sections can last several pages. What matters is that the length of your conclusion be proportional (around 10-20%) to the rest of your paper. A four-line conclusion to a five-page paper is almost always too short.

So how can you make your conclusion give your reader a sense of closure?

Return to a Story or Scene. If you began your paper by using a story or description to “hook” the reader, you can go back to it here. You can tell how it ended, or you can explain how your recommendations might change, or prevent, or achieve it in the future.

Use a Vivid Quotation. You can close your essay with an interesting quotation from a book, movie, or other source, after you explain how it connects to the point you're making. If you're writing about a book or other text, you might choose to end with a quotation from your source or from someone else writing about it.

Change your perspective. If you've been exploring a problem affecting society today, consider how it might affect life a hundred years from now. If you've been writing about what you gained from a personal experience, think about what that experience might help you do next. Have you argued that your proposal has certain kinds of benefits? What other benefit could you mention—the perfect cherry on top of the sundae?