A Brief Guide to Writing Conclusions

What Do Conclusions Do?

Conclusions are your chance to reaffirm where you have taken the reader through your writing. They serve as your opportunity to leave a last impression about your topic, argument, research, etc. and help to show the reader that you have developed your argument or responded to a prompt fully. Put simply, the conclusion provides a sense of closure. However, it should also leave the reader aware of the broader context or implications of your work.

Conclusions can serve a variety of functions depending on discipline, type of assignment, or professor preference. However, the general function of conclusions can be broken down into a few different parts.

The first function of conclusions is to **revisit the claims** you have made throughout the body of the paper. While it may feel repetitive, conclusions help the reader better remember the paper as a whole, reminding them of your main points.

The second function of conclusions is to **relate the claims made in your paper back to your thesis** or intent, which you probably included in your introduction. This helps remind the reader of the significance of your claims to your greater argument.

The final function of the conclusion is to **convey a sense of engagement with the topic** broader in scope than just the argument or the prompt. This lets the reader know that you, the writer, have thought comprehensively about the implications of your work.

How Important Are Conclusions?

Conclusions are important because they are your final opportunity to persuade the reader of your claims and to leave a lasting impression upon your reader about your thinking and writing.

Oftentimes, students writing in their courses see the conclusion as less important than the body of their work and treat it as an afterthought. Relegating conclusions to the final few minutes before a paper is due has become far too commonplace. Ultimately, the writer does a disservice to himself or herself by failing to construct a strong conclusion.

From a utilitarian perspective, it is important to remember that your professor is human. Although they generally strive to objectively evaluate your work as a whole, a poor conclusion can leave your professor with a negative last impression, which can affect your grade.

A strong conclusion can leave the professor with a good last impression of your writing. Even if the rest of the paper is not your best work, a strong conclusion shows the professor you have engaged with your topic, and can in some cases lead to a higher mark than you might otherwise have received.

Grades aside, it is important as a writer to be satisfied with your own work. You have put so much time and effort into your writing; why let a weak conclusion take away from that? You, the writer, owe it to yourself to write a complete paper that you are proud of.

Concluding with Confidence

- Confidence is important to your writing overall and especially to your conclusion
- Remember though, assertively articulating a point over and over does not mean that it is a strong point
- Keep in mind that your reader does not necessarily have to agree with your conclusion
- What is more important is that they are convinced of your argument
- Be sure not to overstate your point
- Instead, be self-assured of the argument you have constructed, and convey this in your conclusion

"I always hope for a conclusion to answer one question: "So what?" So, you've shown me all this evidence, dug lots of examples out of the texts, made claims as to how they're related… so what? Why should we as readers care? One caveat, though: a sweeping conclusion does not necessarily make a strong conclusion. Sometimes it's better for the "so what?" to be extremely focused but absolutely airtight, rather than trying to make generalizations about "society" or "history" or another nebulous category."

- Meg Furniss Weisberg

    Assistant Professor, French; Director, Student Writing

Tips for a Strong Conclusion

Here are some concrete tips to think about when crafting a conclusion. While this list is by no means comprehensive, it should certainly give you some ideas, and start you off in the right direction.

Make a Reverse Outline. Go back through your paper and note the claims you've made. Be sure to address them in your conclusion. *Please see our Brief Guide Series guide for creating reverse outlines for more information.*

- **Reevaluate your Thesis.** Make sure you remind the reader of the paper's main argument.

- **Synthesize, not Summarize.** It is not enough to simply restate your thesis and the claims you have made to support it. Consider ways you might bring your claims together so that the reader understands that each is significant and crucial to your argument.

- **Review Outside Material.** Think outside the immediate scope of your paper. Can you bring in materials from the course reading or from your own research that proved interesting, yet not entirely pertinent to your specific argument? Show your reader you are considering the broader context of the subject.

- **Eliminate Doubt.** While considering counterarguments can be important to a piece of writing, be sure to end confidently. Avoid phrases like "of course, this is not the only," and "of course, there are other perspectives on."

- **Avoid Unspecific Placeholders.** Never use phrases such as "the arguments above" or "the examples mentioned throughout this paper." Be sure to address your claims specifically. On a related note, avoid phrases like "in conclusion." The reader knows they have reached the conclusion; do not waste words.

Examples

Bad Conclusion
In conclusion, the examples explored throughout this paper prove the thesis that the Great Depression was made worse by the political, economic, and social policies enacted by President Roosevelt. That said, other perspectives show that this was not necessarily due to just Roosevelt's policies, but also factors outside of his control.

- Uses unspecific placeholders such as "the examples explored throughout this paper"
- Includes redundant and unnecessary phrases, such as "in conclusion" and "the thesis that"
- Ends by sowing doubt about the entire paper. This tells the reader that the writer does not have confidence in their work

Adequate Conclusion
President Roosevelt's New Deal policies undoubtedly prolonged the Great Depression and caused unnecessary hardships for the American people. Although Roosevelt sincerely believed in his plan, his expanded political institutions, indecision with regard to currency manipulation, and failed social programs ultimately backfired, creating the greatest financial crisis in United States history.

- Does a good job explicitly addressing claims made in the body of the paper
- Connects these claims to the specific thesis of the paper
- Attempts to broaden the scope of the paper historically, but does so generally and minimally
- Reaffirms the argument of the paper, leaving little room for doubt

Good Conclusion
President Roosevelt's New Deal policies, specifically the National Recovery Administration, social security and minimum wage laws, and restrictive banking regulations all came together to form a climate of uncertainty in America, which ultimately prolonged the Great Depression. Roosevelt's hasty decision making and concern for short-term relief must serve as a warning to our present-day policymakers if we are to avoid a similarly devastating crisis in the future.

- Synthesizes specific main arguments creating a feeling of completeness to the paper
- Engages the thesis completely, allowing the reader an opportunity to understand the complex arguments made in the paper
- Expands the scope of the ideas the paper engages, showing engagement not just with the assignment, but with the course overall
- Is extremely confident in the paper