

ENDINGS (PODCAST 19 TRANSCRIPT)

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Greetings everyone. This is Kurtis Clements with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to talk about writing effective endings, or conclusions, for your essays.

All essays, as you know, have a beginning and all essays have an ending. For many writers, endings tend to be more difficult to write than beginnings, so you may need to put in some extra effort to make sure your ending is as effective as possible. If an introduction is like a first impression, then a conclusion is like a last impression—and you want to make yours count.

Ernest Hemingway, the great 20th century American writer, claimed to have written 256 different endings for his short novel *The Old Man and the Sea*, for which he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954. Why did Hemingway write 256 different endings? According to him, he simply needed to get it right, and it took him that many tries. While I don't expect you to try out so many endings to the essays you write (though of course I would applaud such an effort!), I do want you to keep in mind what Hemingway clearly knew: For an ending to be successful, it needs to be satisfying. No one likes to invest time in anything if there isn't some kind of payoff at the end. An ending that is not satisfying is like watching a fireworks display with no grand finale. Good endings create a sense of closure, a sense that the business of the essay has come to a completion; the reader is not expecting more.

When you write your endings, keep in mind that it is your last chance to make sure that what you are trying to communicate in your composition is clear on the page. The ending is the place where you wrap up your thinking and exit gracefully.

Let's talk about the characteristics of an effective ending.

An effective ending brings the writing to a logical close. A conclusion provides then necessary signal to readers that the business of the essay is winding down and the reader is being returned to the world outside of the essay. This transition should be fluid and the parting content thoughtful so that readers are prepared for and satisfied with the ending. Please do yourself and your readers a favor and avoid such hackneyed concluding transitions as "In conclusion," "To sum things up," or "As I've discussed"—or anything else along the lines of those clunky and predictable transitions.

An effective ending reinforces the main idea in an engaging manner. Use the ending as your last chance to reach your audience and make sure the main point, its significance, and/or its larger implications are understood. An effective ending leaves readers with something to think about. Ideally, a conclusion will bring the world of the essay to a close in such a way that even though the business of reading has ended, the audience does not stop thinking about what the essay said—its ideas. You don't want an audience to end reading an essay, thinking "So what?" Provide some content that engages readers with what is important about the topic and your discussion of it so that



the meaning of the writing stays with readers. Now let's talk about some options for endings. What follows is a list of possible endings for the papers you write.

Not all endings are suitable for all essays, so I encourage you to play around with the possibilities. Please also keep in mind that these options can be combined so that an ending may have characteristics of more than one type of ending. Lastly, most introductory techniques can also be used for endings, so you might want to listen to my earlier podcast on writing a good introduction.

Option # 1: The echo. The idea of the echo is to repeat key ideas or words or phrases to create an "echo" that gets at a particular meaning germane to the essay.

Here's an example: Too many drivers act in inappropriate ways when they get behind the wheel of a motor vehicle. Too many drivers are unnecessarily aggressive, darting in and out of traffic, running stop lights, putting everyone else on the road in peril. Too many drivers are just plain inconsiderate as if they are the only ones on the road. And too many of those drivers are just like you and me—good, decent people until we get in our cars.

I hope you heard that echo--Too many drivers, too many drivers, too many drivers. The repetition emphasizes that idea, helping readers connect with the point.

Option # 2: Audience appeal. With this approach, the writer shows or points out directly to the audience how things are (at least from the writer's perspective) or the likely consequences if things remain the same (here, sound logic needs to be employed to be convincing). When the writer appeals directly to the audience, the content is presented in such a way that readers feel the burden of responsibility lies with them.

Here is an example: The current political culture allows for staggering sums of money to be spent on campaigns. The basic idea is not so much about content as it is about getting the word out and creating a buzz. The more you hear about a candidate, the greater the buzz. And of course, creating a buzz costs money, but, as advertisers have known for a long time, it is money well spent. Getting elected is a lot like selling laundry detergent, and until American citizens let their governmental advertisers know that they've had enough, that spending millions of dollars—even if it's a candidate's own money—to hold an office is ludicrous, then we have no one but ourselves to blame.

Did you feel any sense of responsibility or blame after listening to that ending? The idea is to try to rouse some kind of emotions so that readers feel that the cost of creating political buzz is way out of line. Since government is for the people and by the people, the people—readers—are responsible.

Option #3: State the "so what." With this ending, the writer essentially communicates in clear terms the big point—the so what—of the essay. Points made in the development of the essay are often rephrased and presented again; however, the writer tries as best as possible not to parrot the main ideas so the ending sounds canned or formulaic. Here is an example: Today, Maine is one of only ten states that has not passed public charter school legislation. Maine's current public school choice offerings are slim at best. Current choices include only traditional public schools or private schools. Whether the reason for wanting other alternatives is personal or educational, Maine families should be afforded another choice in public education. It's time for Maine to recognize that public charter schools are a valuable choice in free public education.



Option #4: Create a clinching statement. A “clinching” statement is a thought-provoking final statement that leaves your readers thinking. The statement is like hitting a bull’s eye: It’s not easy to do, but when you hit the mark it gets people’s attention because it is dead center and spot on.

Here’s an example from Malcolm X’s “A Homemade Education” in which he talks about the impact of prison on his life. Malcolm X writes: “You couldn’t have gotten me out of books with a wedge. Between Mr. Muhammad’s teachings, my correspondence, my visitors—usually Ella and Reginald—and my reading of books, months passed without my even thinking about being imprisoned. In fact, I never had been so truly free in my life.”

That final statement—the idea of finding freedom in prison—is a jaw-dropping statement that leaves readers thinking long after the reading. That’s what you’re after with the clinching statement ending.

Option #5: Back to the beginning. This ending uses content that in some way refers back to the beginning of the essay, not in a redundant way, but rather in a manner that makes an important connection with earlier content.

Listen to this example: While friends will drift in and out of our lives, disappearing and maybe reappearing, some will be as constant as the stars in the sky. These friends—the essence of true friends—we will keep forever. These few friends will always be around, will see us through thick and thin, good and bad, no matter what, because that is what true friends do.

This ending emphasizes the idea of “true friends” that you will have to imagine was a part of the introduction. This kind of ending creates a thread to the opening, thus joining the two. Creating an ending that takes readers back to the beginning is an effective way to remind readers of an important idea or detail as well as helping to unify the content.

Nota bene: You may have noticed that some of these endings contain the pronouns “we, us, our, you”—and other typically “informal” pronouns that are often not found in so-called “academic” writing. As writers you are responsible for making sure that your ending is appropriate for the audience and purpose of your essay, and, with respect to an assignment, that your use of first and second person pronouns doesn’t contradict established standards set in your class.

Good endings don’t just happen (think about Ernest Hemingway’s 256 endings for *The Old Man and the Sea*). Writers need to work hard to craft an appropriate ending that gives closure to the essay and reinforces the meaning the essay is trying to communicate. These techniques give you some ideas for creating a good ending in the papers you write. Keep in mind that there are other techniques you can employ when writing an ending. Most introductory methods can also work as effective closings, so be sure to check out my podcast on writing a good introduction.

Thanks for listening, everyone. Happy writing!

