



EFFECTIVE CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions are often difficult, for since they depend on the paper, every one is different. You should seldom start a concluding paragraph with “In conclusion, we see that . . .” This means a summary is coming: nothing new and interesting. A summary can be valuable in a long paper, but deadly in a short one.

Also avoid other forms of anticlimax. Especially popular is the sudden realization or belated qualification—say, concluding a vigorous argument against Burke’s theory of government with “Of course, Burke’s analysis is accurate in many ways. It is much more important than I have been able to show here. But still, it’s not really a theory that works.” Or the belated personal commentary: “Personally, I think Burke’s theories are absurd. It is amazing to me that anyone could see government as . . .” Your position should have been clear throughout the paper.

Other methods are likely more effective. Remember, there is no set formula; it all depends on your argument in the rest of the paper.

1. Before writing your paper, list your arguments, pick the most powerful, and put it last. In a short paper, this will provide a natural climax, with little need for summary.

2. Are there, on the basis of your argument, provocative suggestions to make? These are often easy concerning practical issues:

The lesson from these facts is obvious; the State Department ought to do everything possible to promote better relations with the Malagasy Republic . . .

But even in a more abstract context, suggestions can still arise:

Perhaps, then, Burke’s position is difficult to understand because he has failed to define his terms carefully. This possibility deserves consideration . . .

3. Point out the significance of your information:

Thus, Burke’s idea of “rights” must be clearly understood to appreciate his arguments against the French Revolutionaries. In fact, it forms the foundation of . . .

4. Mention any points remaining undecided. Really important issues are rarely wrapped up in neat packages. Were they easy to settle once and for all, they would have been decided long ago. So you might show intelligence and candor by concluding

No clear solution exists to the moral problems Conrad considers in Heart of Darkness. Several are suggested--by Marlow, the cannibals, and Kurtz himself--but for the reasons indicated, none seems adequate. Any such solution lies buried in the heart’s impenetrable darkness.

Make sure to distinguish this method of concluding--which shows that you have done the work, yet still found some element of ambiguity--from belated qualification or merely giving up.

Of course, Conrad may mean something else entirely. It’s just not possible to tell what we are supposed to gather from many of the scenes he writes, so it’s very hard to tell what the secret of life is from his point of view.

5. You can sometimes round off an essay by briefly showing its relevance to something not your principal subject: call this the anecdotal or allusive method. In an essay about Conrad's treatment of social alienation, one might conclude

According to Conrad, alienation destroys those social restraints that impart moral decency. Conrad puts great importance on such restraint, as both an artistic and moral quality. He once noted of his novels: "I've neither grinned nor gnashed my teeth . . . I've tried to write with dignity, not only out of regard of myself, but for the sake of the spectacle of human life, the play with an obscure beginning and an unfathomable denouement." Conrad's belief in restraint provides not only the moral values but also the subtle artistry of his work.

Finally, keep such anecdotes and allusions in control. Make sure they are important in themselves, with a clear relation to your subject. They must never degenerate into mere tacked-on elements.

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