

Conclusions

There are ten varieties of conclusions which appear frequently in expository prose. The ten present: (1) a summary, (2) a final generalization, (3) a final inference, (4) a striking example, (5) an analogy, (6) a parting question, (7) a call to action, (8) a forecast, (9) a denouement, or (10) narrative materials.

1. Conclusions presenting a summary

A common variety of conclusion is that which presents a summary of the writer's main ideas. Such a summary usually occurs in formal rather than informal compositions and is, perhaps, less interesting than the other kinds of conclusions listed here. Nevertheless, it does have the merit of emphasizing, through repetition, the chief points of the essay which it concludes. In addition, it often stresses the importance of those ideas.

Here is an example:

To summarize, our American system of higher education confers three benefits upon its students: it prepares them for a profession, it enables them to achieve a high standard of living, and it helps them to develop an appreciation of our cultural heritage. In addition, it supplies our nation with highly trained persons for business, industry, public service, and the learned professions, and it produces those broadly educated persons who are the true leaders of our society. Indeed, our system of higher education is truly one of our most important assets.

2. Conclusions presenting a final generalization

If the body of an essay has been devoted to a series of examples, the conclusion may present a final generalization based on those examples. For instance, an essay which has dealt with the pollutants found in a number of specific rivers might end with the observation that many American streams are disgracefully contaminated and need to be cleaned up. Conclusions presenting a final generalization are usually rather brief and are therefore perhaps best suited to short essays.

Here is an example:

As these examples demonstrate, many American cities now find it necessary to get rid of their trash in unusual—and expensive—ways. Consequently, I shall not be really surprised when some desperate mayor attempts to buy some surplus rockets in order to shoot the stuff into outer space, for it is clear that we are rapidly running out of places to put it here on earth.

3. Conclusions presenting a final inference

Sometimes a conclusion presents a final inference or judgment based on the data offered in the body of the essay. This variety of conclusion is especially useful when a writer is dealing with a controversial topic, since it produces an air of fairness and objectivity.

Here is an example:

Such evidence indicates that our school “honor code” is a failure. Cheating is widespread, and the present system merely serves to penalize the honest student. Obviously, the administration should act promptly to abolish the “honor code.”

4. Conclusions presenting a striking example

By ending with such an example, a writer effectively emphasizes the main idea of his essay.

Here is an example:

Obviously, one should never underestimate the resourcefulness of city dwellers in coping with problems created by strikes of municipal employees. A certain New York householder gift-wrapped the previous days accumulation of garbage so that it made a very attractive package, set it on the subway seat beside him when he went to work, then “forgot” to keep an eye on it while reading his newspaper. For eighteen consecutive mornings, by the time he reached his destination, someone had stolen the package. And the householder therefore arrived at the office empty-handed, happy in the knowledge that he had taught somebody that crime does not pay.

5. Conclusions presenting an analogy

Sometimes an essay ends with an analogy, a comparison which attempts to increase the reader’s understanding by showing its resemblance to another idea or concept which is familiar to the reader. For example, suppose a student wishes the reader to visualize the specially designed antenna which the astronauts erected on the moon in order to communicate with earth. The reader probably knows little, if anything, about antennas for interplanetary radio systems. But if you tell the reader that it looks like a large open umbrella set upside down on a tripod, he will be able to visualize the antenna. This comparison is an analogy. If a final analogy is well-chosen, it strongly emphasizes the writer’s main idea. In addition, it acts as a sort of final, stylistic flourish which gives the essay a sense of completeness.

Here is an example:

In his quest for a drug which will cure cancer, the medical researcher may be compared to a botanist who is trying to develop a new weed killer. Although there are thousands of chemicals which completely destroy weeds, most of them are equally efficient in wiping out grass. So the botanist must look for a chemical which is selective in its action, killing the weeds but leaving the grass unharmed. In similar fashion, the medical researcher knows that there are many chemicals which will quickly destroy cancer cells in a test tube, but which are just as deadly to normal body

cells. Therefore, he must hunt for a chemical which selectively kills the cancer cells but leaves the patient's healthy tissue uninjured.

6. Conclusions presenting a parting question

Sometimes after a writer has completed a discussion of a subject, he poses one or more questions; these questions invite the reader to ponder the matter further and, thus, to crystallize his own thinking. Such a conclusion is especially effective when the essay has dealt with a "problem" subject—for example, crime, narcotics, defects in our educational system, corruption in government, unethical business practices, pollution, racial strife, or the possibility of worldwide warfare.

Here is an example:

Without doubt, the present faculty disciplinary committee should be replaced by a student court. An overwhelming majority of the student body favors such a change. Why, then are the officials of this school reluctant to take action? Are they unaware of the advantages of a student court system? Or are they simply indifferent to student opinion?

7. Conclusions presenting a call to action

If an essay deals with a "problem" subject, a writer may not wish to end with a parting question. Instead, he may prefer a conclusion which presents a call to action. Such a conclusion encourages the reader to pursue some desired course of action.

Here is an example:

Since the officials of this school seem reluctant to replace the present faculty disciplinary committee with a student court, we'll simply have to try to make them understand the great advantages of a student-court system. So let's form a committee of concerned students to meet with the faculty and, if necessary, with the deans and president as well. And let's get the dialogue started right away. We students have a right to be heard on an issue of such importance to every one of us.

8. Conclusions presenting a forecast

Sometimes an essay ends with a forecast. For instance, after discussing the development of the laser, a writer might prophesy its future use as a weapon. Such a conclusion can give added significance to the subject the writer has been discussing.

Here is an example:

Certainly, the available evidence suggests strongly that the major American political parties are currently in deep trouble. And their problems are quite likely to become even more severe in the future. The cost of electioneering will continue to skyrocket. Large numbers of young adults will either ignore politics altogether as a boring and dishonest activity, or at least refuse to wear a party label. And more and more voters of all ages will dismiss the major political parties as irrelevant and hopelessly out of tune with the realities of contemporary society. For these reasons, it seems very probable that our present political parties are destined to disappear in the near future.

9. Conclusions presenting a denouement

Sometimes after the body of a narrative essay relates the main series of happenings, the conclusion briefly explains what happened afterwards. For instance, if the body of the essay describes the frantic search made by police officers to locate a child bitten by a rabid dog, the conclusion might briefly explain that the child received the Pasteur treatment and did not contract the disease. Such an explanation would be a denouement. After finishing the writer's account of the series of connected happenings which constitute the body of the essay, the reader may be inclined to ask, "Well, what were the consequences of those events? What was the final outcome?" By attempting to anticipate—and answer—such questions, the denouement can be very useful in "wrapping up" the subject.

Here is an example:

Eventually, of course, my sister Janice became an excellent cook. She now has a bulging file of tasty recipes, and her delicious meals have earned the praise of the whole family. But none of us has ever quite forgotten the fiasco that occurred when Janice, then a recent bride, roasted a turkey without first removing its insides. And she herself blushed scarlet last Thanksgiving when a guest, in all innocence, asked the simple question, "What kind of stuffing did you have this year, my dear?"

10. Conclusions presenting narrative materials

If the writer finishes with an appropriate anecdote or an exciting incident, the reader will be likely to feel that the whole essay has been interesting and ended on a "high note." Such a conclusion is most effective when the essay body does not deal with a series of related happenings. In other words, a narrative essay usually does not have a separate narrative conclusion. Rather, each body topic presents one of the related happenings, with the last topic giving the final climactic incident—and at that point the writer has finished telling his "story." If he adds a conclusion, it is ordinarily a forecast, a denouement, or some other non-narrative type. On the other hand, an essay made up of non-narrative body topics often has a narrative conclusion. For example, if the body of an essay lists the ways in which college basketball differs

from professional basketball, the conclusion might present an anecdote about a former college star playing his first professional game.

Here is an example:

As these examples show, American parents used to name their offspring after “great” persons—Biblical figures, European monarchs, conquering generals, Presidents, and major writers. But I believe a new trend has developed. In recent years, thousands of children have been given the names of television personalities. Chicago newspapermen tell the story of a housewife who asked her paper boy his name. “Phil,” replied the youngster, “Phil Donahue Smith.” “My goodness,” said the woman, “that’s certainly a well-known name.” The boy nodded. “Well it sure as heck ought to be,” he replied, “I’ve been delivering papers on this street for three years!”