

Essay Conclusions: Notes

Writing Effective Conclusions

A conclusion provides a thoughtful end to a piece of writing; unfortunately, many conclusions in college-level papers are little more than summaries of what has already been said.

Here are a few tips to make conclusions more interesting. You may wish to check with your professor about specific recommendations in your field of study; many fields have specific formats for conclusions and other parts of essays, research reports, and experiments. The points below are most applicable to papers in the humanities:

Avoid:

- Ending with a rephrased thesis statement that contains no substantive changes.
- Introducing a new idea or subtopic (although you may end with a provocative question; see below).
- Focusing on a minor point in the essay.
- Concluding with a sentence tacked on to your final point.
- Apologizing for your view by saying such things as "I may not be an expert" or "At least this is my opinion."
- Attempting to make up for an incomplete structure. (If you say you will discuss four books, attempt a complete discussion of two books, do not try to cover the remaining texts in a concluding paragraph. In such a situation, it's best to limit your paper to topics you can realistically cover.)

Conclude an essay with one or more of the following:

- Include a brief summary of the paper's main points.
- Ask a provocative question.
- Use a quotation.
- Evoke a vivid image.
- Call for some sort of action.
- End with a warning.
- Universalize (compare to other situations).
- Suggest results or consequences.

Try to refer to the introductory paragraph, either with key words or parallel concepts and images.

Essays

DESCRIPTIVE – an essay in which a writer describes something (e.g. a place, person, event, etc.) in as much detail as possible

EXPOSITORY – an essay in which a writer attempts to explain something

PERSUASIVE – an essay in which a writer argues for or against a position on a specific issue

COMPARE/CONTRAST – an essay in which a writer discusses the similarities and/or differences between two things, often (but not always) with the purpose of demonstrating the superiority of one over the other

NARRATIVE – an essay in which a writer tells a story; the structure may be traditional (i.e. beginning, middle and end), or a series of shorter anecdotes

PERSONAL – an essay in which a writer discusses something significant about them, their life and/or their experience(s); personal essays will almost always have some narrative element to them.

Introductory Techniques – the purpose of an introduction is to (i) identify the subject of the essay; (ii) capture the interest of the reader; (iii) to set the tone of the essay; and (iv) to state the *thesis* of the essay. Here are some ways to introduce an essay. Note that no introductory technique is necessarily better than another, and it is perfectly acceptable

to use more than one technique; it is up to the writer to determine which techniques work best for them and their purpose.

- 1.) State the central theme or topic.
- 2.) Identify the significance of the subject.
- 3.) Give background information about the subject.
- 4.) Pose a question.
- 5.) Use a figurative or rhetorical device (see below for examples).
- 6.) Present an interesting or shocking statistic or fact.
- 7.) Use a quotation.

Closing Techniques – the simplest way to end an essay is to *summarize* the information and ideas presented by the author; however, this is a very simplistic way to conclude an essay, and not really necessary for short(er) compositions. Here are some ways to conclude an essay. Note that no closing technique is necessarily better than another, and it is perfectly acceptable to use more than one technique; it is up to the writer to determine which techniques work best for them and their purpose.

- 1.) Restate the central idea or theme.
- 2.) Reiterate the significance of the subject.
- 3.) Use a figurative or rhetorical device (see below for examples).
- 4.) Offer a reflection on the significance of the subject.
- 5.) Offer a suggestion (or even a challenge) to the reader (or society, institutions, etc.).
- 6.) Use a quotation.
- 7.) “Echo” the introduction.

Figurative Devices – although frequently associated only with poetry, *figurative* (i.e. non-literal) language is an effective tool in essay writing; figurative devices can make images more clear, emotions more authentic, and events more vivid (they also make writing more enjoyable to read). Here are some commonly used figurative devices:

Simile – a comparison using “like” or “as” (e.g. “His skin was *like* ice, smooth and cold.”)

Metaphor – a comparison between two dissimilar things (e.g. “Her hair was spun gold.”)

Personification – giving human characteristics to inanimate objects or abstract ideas (e.g. “The wind spoke to the trees, and the leaves replied.”)

Allusion – a reference to a person, place or event from history, literature, mythology, religion or popular culture (e.g. “Calvin and Suneer dated for a year, despite the fact their parents disapproved of the relationship. They were the Romeo and Juliet of our school.”)

Oxymoron – a pair of contradictory terms (e.g. *cold fire, deafening silence, bright darkness*)

Paradox – statement that, at first, appears to be contradictory, but after closer examination is, in fact, true (e.g. “Life is cruel and life is kind.”)

Rhetorical Techniques – rhetorical techniques are used by writers in an attempt to get a reader to consider something (e.g. a person, event, belief) from a different perspective, or even simply consider something more carefully than they might usually. While figurative devices are technically considered types of rhetorical techniques, there are others as well.

(Rhetorical) question – a question posed by a writer to the reader that has (or may seem to have) an obvious answer, or may be unanswerable; the purpose of the question is to get the reader focused on (and thinking about) the subject of the essay.

irony – irony is when something occurs which goes against what a reader would normally expect: *verbal irony* (sarcasm) is when a person says the opposite of what they mean or feel; *situational irony* is when a person or situation goes against a reader’s expectations (e.g. a lifeguard drowns; a firefighter turns out to be an arsonist); *dramatic irony* occurs when a reader is aware of something that person or character in a piece of writing is not (this is most often used to create tension in a narrative).

Parallel structure – parallel structure (or parallelism) is when a writer structures two or more consecutive sentences (or clauses) in the same grammatical fashion (e.g. “I was cold. I was hungry. I was lost.”)

Repetition – writers may often repeat words, phrases or images in a piece of writing in order to *emphasize* the significance of that word, phrase or image.

Hyperbole – an intentional overstatement or exaggeration.

Other Terms Used in the Writing and Discussion of Essays

Diction – diction refers simply to a writer *choice of words*; effective word choice should always be *accurate* and *appropriate* in relation to an essay’s purpose and subject matter.

Syntax – syntax refers simply to a writer’s use of *sentences*; good writers will manipulate the *length* and *type* of sentences in an essay to emphasize certain points, connect important ideas, and make their composition more engaging.

Style – style refers to a writer’s own individual choices in terms of syntax, diction and the selection and arrangement of information in his/her essay.

Tone – tone is a reflection of the writer’s *attitude* toward his/her subject (e.g. playful, serious, loving, critical, reflective, angry, etc.).

Unity – unity refers to how *every* part of an essay is (or at least *should* be) connected to the *thesis*; if a writer goes “off-topic” at any point, then their essay is said to lack unity

Coherence – similar to unity, coherence refers to how each part of an essay is (or at least *should* be) logically connected to the parts that came before it, and the parts that come after it.

Colloquial language – language that is used in informal situations and conversation (a common form of colloquial language is *slang*); since most academic writing is

formal in nature, writers should avoid colloquial language, unless they intend to use it for a particular effect (e.g. humour, irony, etc.). For example, “stuff” is colloquial, but “material possessions” is more formal.

Concluding Paragraphs – Examples

1. Use a new quotation or refer back to the opening quotation.

Keeping physically fit, mailing out greeting cards, and filling out applications for technology grants are three very realistic goals for me. Instead of complaining about how I feel or what I don't have, I'm going to take Maya Angelou's advice and make some changes. If I keep these promises I've made to myself, I know I'll have a better life and a better attitude.

2. Make a prediction or recommendation based on the facts or statistics.

Keeping physically fit, mailing out greeting cards, and filling out applications for technology grants are three very realistic goals for me. I don't plan on being one of the 37 percent who weren't able to keep their New Year's resolutions. I intend on keeping these promises that I've made to myself.

3. Complete the anecdote.

Keeping physically fit, mailing out greeting cards, and filling out applications for technology grants are three very important goals for me. Unlike years past, my resolutions are focused and realistic. I intend on keeping these promises that I've made to myself.

4. Ask a final rhetorical question.

Keeping physically fit, mailing out greeting cards, and filling out applications for technology grants are three very realistic goals for me. Now that I've planned out my resolutions carefully, I know I have a better chance of making them happen. With determination and will power, how can I possibly fail?

5. Continue the original description of a character, setting, or object

Keeping physically fit, mailing out greeting cards, and filling out applications for technology grants are three very realistic goals for me. At the end of this year, after the party is over, and the hats and confetti are colorfully scattered across the floor, I'll feel good about the plans I made and the promises I was able to keep.

6. Make a Call to Action

Keeping physically fit, mailing out greeting cards, and filling out applications for technology grants are three very realistic goals for me. Perhaps you also have some goals for the new year in mind. If not, I urge you to sit down and make some today. You will feel better about yourself when you have reached your chosen objectives.

7. Summary (for Response to Literature essay)

Although Melanie is tentative about making new friends in the beginning of the story, by the end she has become more assertive and outgoing. As we see Melanie's character develop, we realize that although it may be scary to face big changes in life, overcoming difficult challenges can help us to grow and become stronger in ways that we may never have imagined were possible.

Introductory Paragraphs – Examples

A. Using a Quotation

The great United States poet, Maya Angelou, once said, "If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude. Don't complain." Her words make a lot of sense to me as I think about the New Year's resolutions I would like to make in 2001. Instead of complaining about things I don't like, I'm going to try to make some changes. Three resolutions that I plan on keeping this year are to exercise regularly, to send Christmas cards, and to apply for technology grants.

B. Using a Startling Fact or Statistic

According to a new University of Washington survey, 63 percent of the people questioned were still keeping their number one New Year's resolution after two months. That's pretty encouraging to me, as I think about my New Year's resolutions. If that many people can fulfill their promises to themselves, I'm confident that I can, too. The three resolutions that I plan on keeping in the year 2001 are to exercise regularly, send Christmas cards, and apply for technology grants.

C. Using an Anecdote

I can remember the first time I learned about New Year's resolutions. I made a list of about twenty changes I wanted to make in my life. Of course, the list was too long to remember, and the resolutions were too difficult to keep. I don't think I ended up following a single one for more than a few days. Although I haven't been very good at keeping my New Year's resolutions in the past, this year I'm determined to follow through with my promises. Three resolutions that I plan on keeping this year are to exercise regularly, send Christmas cards, and apply for technology grants.

D. Using a Rhetorical Question

Why is it so difficult to keep a New Year's resolution? Could it be that we set unrealistic goals for ourselves? Or do we make our resolutions just before midnight without really thinking the matter over? Although I haven't been very good at keeping my New Year's resolutions in the past, this year I'm determined to follow through with my promises. Three resolutions that I plan on keeping are to exercise regularly, send Christmas cards, and apply for technology grants.

E. Using Description

It's a few minutes before midnight. The party hats are on, the streamers are ready to fly, and the noisemakers are ready to be blown. Suddenly I'm filled with the overwhelming urge to make some New Year's resolutions on anything from losing weight to keeping a journal to learning how to watercolor. I might even take a few seconds to write the resolutions down. Is it any wonder that such hastily thought-out resolutions are rarely kept? This year I've considered my goals very carefully. The three resolutions I plan on keeping are to exercise regularly, to send Christmas cards, and to apply for technology grants.

F. Story Summary (for Response to Literature essay)

The main character in Harvey Swashbuckle's short story "A New Leaf" is a young girl named Melanie. She lives in a small town in the middle of a cold and snowy Nebraska. The problem she faces is that she's new to the town and her shyness is keeping her from making new friends.

During the story, she meets an old lady in a nursing home who talks to her about her adventurous teenage years. In the beginning of the story, Melanie is shy and fearful about getting to know the kids at her new school, but during the story she learns that she can't let life pass her by, and she becomes more confident and outgoing.