In Conclusion: Tips to create a memorable ending for your narrative essay

[*Apr11*](http://writingcenterunderground.wordpress.com/2012/04/11/in-conclusion-tips-to-create-a-memorable-ending-for-your-narrative-essay-2/) by [Elizabeth Mack](http://writingcenterunderground.wordpress.com/author/metrowc1/)

As difficult as it is to begin a personal narrative essay, wrapping it up can be even more challenging. Writers often fall into the trap of tying the narrative up *too* neatly, telling the readers what they are supposed to take away from their story instead of letting the reader come to their own conclusions. Study a few essays from some of the great writers and notice how they conclude their stories. Often the ending to their narratives is left ambiguous; the reader isn’t exactly sure how everything will turn out; however, the reader should be left with a sense of closure.

Below are some strategies you might use to come to a satisfying conclusion in your own stories. All are final lines from some popular essays.

***End with an Image***

When nature essayist Scott Russell Sanders was in Omaha to talk to writing students, he said one of the most common problems for beginning writers when crafting a narrative essay is conclusions. He said his advice is always the same: if in doubt, end on an image. It’s foolproof. *Showing* an image prevents you from *telling* your feelings. In the essay “Buckeye,” Scott Russell Sanders uses the image of a grazing deer to conclude his narrative:

**. . . within a few paces of a grazing deer, close enough to see the delicate lips, the twitching nostrils, the glossy, fathomless eyes.**

This lyrical conclusion comes from “Bathing,” as writer Kathryn Winograd shows the last moments of her bath:

**The wind sings through the window like a siren, and the steam floats from my skin like milk.**

***End with Action***

Show yourself in action. Move. Do something, anything, to avoid telling the reader how happy, or sad, or hopeful you are in the end. Look at something, and walk away, as Edward Hoagland does in “The Courage of Turtles”:  
 **But since, short of diving in after him, there was nothing I could do, I walked away.**

Or look at something, and become mesmerized. A chapter from the classic memoir, *Stop Time* by Frank Conroy, “Yo-Yo Going Down, a Mad Squirrel Coming Up,” shows a young Conroy as he watches a girl through a window:

**That same night, hidden in the greenery under the window, I watched a naked girl let down her long red hair.**

***End with Dialogue***

Dialogue can be tricky to conclude with, but can work if it avoids a message or moral. You’ll only want to use this concluding technique if it has been maintained in the narrative; you probably don’t want to throw in spoken word if we haven’t heard anyone speak up until that point.

David Sedaris, in his essay, “Cyclops,” ends with the voice of his father, who is the main character in this essay:  
 **“I don’t know where you got it from, but in the end, it’s going to kill you.”**

The following brief reply, taken from Jo Ann Beard’s “The Fourth State of Matter,” shows an image, followed by unquoted dialogue. Beard uses italics instead:

**Around my neck is the stone he brought me from Poland. I hold it out. *Like this?* I ask. Shards of fly wings, suspended in amber.  
*Exactly*, he says.**

Another example below comes again from Scott Russell Sanders, this from “Cloud Crossing,” as his toddler son babbles:

**“Moon,” he is piping from the back seat, “moon, moon!”**

***End with Reflection***

When used well, reflection is a great way to convey feelings without *telling* the reader *how* you felt – or how they should feel. Reflection offers the writer’s thoughts about what is happening or has happened. Reflection can include thoughts about the moment or thoughts looking back, about the experience. Reflection can add clarity, as we see the writer thinking through the experience. This concluding moment is from James Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son”:

**. . . I wished that he had been beside me so that I could have searched his face for the answers which only the future would give me now.**

Bret Lott, in his short essay, “Brothers,” reflects on childhood memories of his family, taking him into the present with his own two sons:

**What I believe is this: That pinch was entry into our childhood; my arm around him, our smiling, is the proof of us two surfacing, alive but not unscathed.  
And here are my own two boys, already embarked.**

When writing your own conclusion, think about what you want your readers to take away from your story. Then think about how best you can show it. Ending with reflection may work great for one story, but not another. Concluding with dialogue may sound forced. You seldom can go wrong with images. Think about what feeling, emotion, or question you want to leave your readers with, the take-away, then pick the type of conclusion that best suits the piece. If you’ve done your job showing the event or experience throughout the narrative, the conclusion will come naturally.

Narrative essays often read like stories. As a result, conclusion techniques such as a summary paragraph or paraphrasing the first paragraph will probably fall short. The writer must strike the right emotional note, one that evokes meaning and helps the reader to understand why the subject of your essay matters to you, which is what really makes it worth reading. While other essays teach us about issues and events, narrative essays illuminate the human condition.

Step 1

Project time forward to end a narrative essay. If the narrative took place ten years ago, you might write the conclusion from the perspective of someone who understands more now than you did then. Or you might write from the perspective of someone who is as baffled as ever. If you take the perspective of one who now understands, be careful not to write a paragraph that sounds as if you are telling the reader what the moral of the story is. If possible, use sensory impressions to connote meaning rather than explain meaning. "Today I live in New York City. I didn't make time to visit my mother near the end of her life, so she died lonely" explains. But this creates meaning without explaining: "Today I live in New York City. I still remember my mother frantically waving goodbye, both empty hands flailing the air, on the day I left her for the last time."

Step 2

Lead the reader into the conclusion with a final scene in real time as an alternative to projecting time forward. Describe a specific physical action or a final verbal exchange or a combination of those.

Step 3

Avoid telling the reader how to feel. The conclusion of a narrative essay should resonate, not dictate. If you think of a movie about a character who overcomes adversity and emerges in triumph at the end of the narrative, you will notice that nowhere does the screenplay writer or director tell the reader to feel happy at the end. Instead the characters enact the end in a setting; we watch them, and thus we are transported to happiness. The end of a narrative essay can work in the same manner.

Step 4

Include personal reflection in the conclusion, but avoid the temptation to explain everything. It's not necessary to answer all the questions a reader might have. Like fiction, a narrative essay may imply meaning rather than prescribe solutions. It's a sturdy genre that can work from metaphor, symbol and lyric language as well as describe and analyze

**Types of Conclusions**

Essay conclusions are, as a rule, no more than one paragraph in length. To have a lengthier conclusion is to introduce a new topic or bring in too much information to neatly wrap up the essay. Many students are under the impression that the conclusion should be a summary of the essay, touching on all the points as a reminder to the reader. While this may be true in some disciplines (especially, within the social sciences), it is not the most creative or interesting way to conclude an essay for your English class. Instead, consider one of the following possibilities as you write your

concluding paragraph.

The Embedded Conclusion

In some cases, especially with a narrative essay that tells a personal story in chronological order, the conclusion can be the last paragraph of the body. For instance, if you are telling the story of how you learned the English language, and the last paragraph brings us to your current state of increased confidence mixed with lingering cautiousness, then that last paragraph gives us a solid place to part company.

*Example:*

I am now studying English in an ESL class at Cabrillo College. I know this is not the last leg of my journey, for I have a lot more to learn about American idioms and phrasing. However, even as I struggle, I feel more confidence than ever before. I am so far getting “A” grades on all my written assignments. Still, I will always feel cautious, like I am walking on egg shells, as I try to use a language that is so different from the one I was born into in a land faraway.

The Retrospective Conclusion

For a narrative essay, or for any essay that uses chronology or traces an historic movement, you may want to consider the retrospective conclusion. This concluding paragraph uses “hindsight” to consider what came before with new insight gained from experience.

*Example*:

Ten years ago, I would never have believed that I would be living in the United States and using English to buy groceries and make new friends. I would have fainted at the thought of writing professional documents in the English language. Nonetheless, here I am, writing an English essay in my first college English class and expecting to receive an “A.” Time will tell how far my English studies will take me.

The Reflective Conclusion

The reflective conclusion is similar to the retrospective kind, but it allows a broader train of thought as one considers the various themes, lessons, or insights that have emerged from the essay writing experience.

*Example:*

In choosing to approach life’s challenges from a passive position, many teens see their bad choices as a result of their circumstances. Whether it’s an unwanted pregnancy, a drug addiction, or an abusive relationship, girls especially can make excuses so that they don’t have to change. I wish I could tell them that they don’t have to be imprisoned by their past choices—it’s never too late to take charge of your destiny.

The Projective Conclusion

This type of conclusion works especially well for research papers but can be used for most expository essays and some narrative ones as well. It involves projecting a future outcome of the circumstances you describe. It may project the negative results of a social issue if it remains unresolved or a threat to humanity. In other contexts, this conclusion can state a need for further research in an area to enhance our understanding, or it could predict an interesting, unexpected outcome based on current trends.

*Example*:

A crisis continues to brew in our school systems where it is no longer the case of just bullies turning to serial violence. As we saw in the Columbine shootings, even victims of chronic bullying, in an attempt to fight back and regain some power or dignity, are taking up arms and gunning down their classmates. Case after case shows us that criminal violence amongst school-aged children in America is not limited to just males or pinned to any one ethnicity or socioeconomic class. It is a crisis of the generation gap increased by rapidly changing technology and a lack of real communication. Unless we start talking to each other, more of our youth will die, and children will be safer on the streets than they are in the schoolyard. The above four types of conclusions are not meant to limit you but to give you guidance as you apply your own unique stamp of creativity to your essay. The most important factor in writing your conclusion is that you give yourself enough time to experiment with a few possibilities. Don’t deny yourself the creative thrill of that final

flourish!