"Tell Us Where We Stand": The Art of the Conclusion

Simply put, most of us don’t have a particularly easy time writing conclusions. After you’ve spent three, four, maybe even twelve pages (depending on the assignment) on a long discussion of your arguments, it’s time to tie everything you’ve said together and, simultaneously, leave the audience with a good lasting impression. The prospect can quickly get overwhelming, and what’s more, sometimes it just seems impossible to find the right balance between not overwhelming your conclusion with new material and also not writing so sparsely that your essay ends too abruptly. There are, however, some tactics that can make it easier to approach this daunting task, and while the exact details of what one does will depend on the essay in question, these techniques will hopefully make the process easier.

1. First off, there’s a reason we call it a “conclusion” and not the “last body paragraph”. Your conclusion really doesn’t need to have new material for your argument. If you find yourself analyzing evidence, you’d best either split it off into its own paragraph or move it elsewhere. The truth is, if this material is relevant to your argument, you’ll want to put it where it counts, and not just leave it to the end.

2. The most general rule I can think of for what actually needs to go into a conclusion? It needs to somehow tie back to your thesis: it serves as a “bookend” that tells the reader that your analysis is finished and that it’s time to look at the big picture again. The best place to start is to restate your thesis and then write a brief summary of your main points. The reader, who has been pondering all of the detailed points you’ve brought up earlier, may also need a reminder as to what it’s all about, and so this can serve two purposes at once.

3. A mistake many writers make is thinking that in “summarizing” their main points, they need to discuss absolutely everything they’ve written in the paper and reference particulars. The fact is that the details are elsewhere in the essay and aren’t really necessary here: the best way to summarize your paper is to keep it simple. Step back, look at what you’ve written, and see if there is anything that would be too specific and too nuanced for, say, an outline or a series of bullet points. If there is, edit it out: you’ve talked about it elsewhere.

4. This may seem like an obvious point, but it’s one many people forget: even for a long essay, the conclusion can be short. Especially when compared to the body paragraphs, your conclusion can be very, very short. The trick here is to avoid ending abruptly (which we’ll get to in a moment), but really, you get a bit of a break at the end of the paper: nobody expects lengthiness here, and if you’re the sort of writer who claims that they struggle with finding enough to say, this is your chance to relax a bit.

5. The part that many people find difficult is wondering what note to leave off on, and a good suggestion I’ve heard is that the final few sentences espouse a “so what”,...
some question that your essay doesn’t address but that could logically follow from everything you’ve written. Hypothetically, it would allow other academics to build on your work, and while it should relate to the topic at hand, it’s not your job to answer this question (as you’ve presumably been analyzing some other one). In science writing, this often takes the form of proposed future experiments, while in English essays it often takes the form of a hypothesis that one could (conceivably) write about if they had to write another essay. The “so what” shouldn’t be arbitrary, and in general teachers won’t be happy if one attempts to include a moral or something similar, but otherwise it’s often the case that the final part of the conclusion is basically up to one’s will. The task of finishing one’s paper is a daunting one, but really, much more is up to you than you’d guess.

While it may seem trivial to point this out, remember that the conclusion is meant to be the ending paragraph. It’s time to draw your essay back to your original point and remind the audience of your general purpose, and then perhaps to illustrate the directions in which you could take this topic (after all, one paper never delivers all the answers). Though this is obviously easier said than done, if you have a full understanding of your essay’s topic then I have full confidence that you’ll be able to pull this off. Get at it!