CONCLUDING PARAGRAPHS

Your conclusion is your opportunity to wrap up your essay in a tidy package and bring it home for your reader. It is a good idea to summarize what you said in your thesis statement in order to suggest to your readers that you have accomplished what you set out to accomplish. It is also important to judge for yourself that you have, in fact, done so. If you find that your thesis statement now sounds hollow or irrelevant—that you haven’t done what you set out to do—then you need either to revise your argument or to redefine your thesis statement. Don’t worry about that; it happens to writers all the time. They have argued themselves into a position that they might not have thought of when they began their writing. Writing, just as much as reading, is a process of self-discovery. Do not, in any case, simply use the exact same wording of your thesis statement in your final paragraph, as that would be redundant. Having read your essay, readers should understand this main thought with a deeper understanding, and your conclusion should refresh their memories concerning the main points of your paper.

There are some cautions to keep in mind while fashioning your final utterance. First, don’t finish with a sentimental flourish that shows you’re trying to do too much. It’s probably enough that your essay on recycling will slow the growth of the landfill in Hartford’s North Meadows. You don’t need to claim that recycling soda bottles will save the world for our children’s children. That may be true, in fact, but it’s better to claim too little than too much; otherwise, your readers are going to be left with that feeling of "Who’s s/he kidding?" The conclusion should contain a definite, positive statement or call to action, but that statement needs to be based on what has been provided in the essay.

Second, the conclusion is no place to bring up new ideas. If a brilliant idea tries to sneak into your final paragraph, pluck it out and let it have its own paragraph earlier in the essay. If it doesn’t fit the structure or argument of the essay, leave it out altogether and let it have its own essay later on. The last thing you want in your conclusion is an excuse for your readers’ minds to wander off into some new field. Allowing a peer editor or friend to reread your essay before handing it in is one way to check this impulse before it ruins your good intentions and hard work.

Never apologize for or otherwise undercut the argument you’ve made or leave your readers with the sense that "this is just little ol’ me talking." Instead, leave your readers with the sense that they’ve been in the company of someone who knows what he or she is doing. Also, if you promised in the introduction that you were going to cover four points and you covered only two, because you couldn’t find enough information or you took too long with the first two or you got tired, don’t try to cram those last two points into your final paragraph. The "rush job" will be all too apparent. Instead, revise your introduction or take the time to do justice to these other points.

The material presented in this handout has been adapted from “Concluding Paragraphs,” located at http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/composition/recordings.htm.
CONCLUDING PARAGRAPHS

Here is a brief list of things that you might accomplish in your concluding paragraph(s). * There are certainly other things that you can do, and you certainly don’t want to do all these things. They are only suggestions:

- 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.

As an illustration of a wonderful conclusion, here is the final paragraph of George Orwell's famous essay, "Politics and the English Language":

I have not here been considering the literary use of language, but merely language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought. Stuart Chase and others have come near to claiming that all abstract words are meaningless, and have used this as a pretext for advocating a kind of political quietism. Since you don’t know what Fascism is, how can you struggle against Fascism? One need not swallow such absurdities as this, but one ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end. If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself. Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. One cannot change this all in a moment, but one can at least change one’s own habits, and from time to time one can even, if one jeers loudly enough, send some worn-out and useless phrase—some jackboot, Achilles’ heel, hotbed, melting pot, acid test, veritable inferno, or other lump of verbal refuse—into the dustbin, where it belongs.

* This list of things that you might do in a concluding paragraph is taken with permission from the University of Richmond’s Writing Web’s document, “Writing Conclusions.”