

# How to Write a Conclusion that Works

## In Conclusion

It's the shortest graf in your document, so why is it so hard to write? Maybe your past instruction has focused too much on what **NOT** to do and not enough on useable, repeatable strategies for what you can do.

Everyone knows the list of what NOT to do:

- **DO NOT** simply restate your thesis in essentially the same words.
- **DO NOT** rehash the main points of your body graf.
- **DO NOT** introduce a new direction or slant.

OK. Then what do you do?

First, to get at some workable strategies, think about the different kind of conclusions there are in the world. A conclusion can be:

1. ***The outcome of doing something.*** If the purpose of your paper is to persuade your readers to do something or to believe a certain way, your conclusion could project the possible outcome or result of doing that.
2. ***A judgment reached after deliberation.*** In this case, the main body of your paper is the deliberation (like a trial) and your conclusion becomes your ultimate judgment or decision about it.
3. ***A final arrangement or settlement.*** If you paper has been contrasting different options, or if it has been considering different points of view, your conclusion can present your final choice or settlement of the debate.
4. ***An insight based upon exploration.*** In this scenario, the preceding parts of the paper are like an investigation, an attempt to solve a riddle or mystery. The conclusion becomes the solution to it.
5. ***The final act.*** This is usually the best way to end a narrative—with the last or concluding action, like the third act of a play, or the last gasp of a dying person.

## So What?

What if none of the above seem to work for you? There is one catchall strategy that can work in a variety of situations:

**Write a few sentences that answer for your reader this question: "So what?"** In other words, what is the importance of what you've written? What should a reader bother reading it?

If your essay has made an argument for the mandatory use of rubber gloves in your hospital work unit, your answer to "so what" could be:

*"AIDS is forever. It is this hospital's responsibility as well as our individual responsibility to care for patients in a way that does not put us or them at any unreasonable risk. If rubber gloves all but eliminate the risk of exposure to this deadly disease, then what are we waiting for? Gloves are cheap. The price of AIDS is too high for any employee to pay."*

The sentence **"Then what are we waiting for? . . . The price of AIDS is too high for any employee to pay"** clearly and definitively answers "So What?" It provides the importance and suggests an action: institute the rubber glove program today!

The **"So What"** technique is the most common one used in professional writing. In the real world, writers rarely write for the joy of it, and readers of nonfiction rarely read for the joy of it. Instead, professional nonfiction is intended to have an effect. Nonfiction in the real world is a kinetic art—the goal of the reader's experience is to make something happen:

- To make a decision
- To influence decisions of others
- To shape opinions
- To complete a task
- To fix something that is broken, whether material or nonmaterial
- To recognize new opportunities, problems or risks
- And so on through all the many purposes that service journalism plays in our lives today

Instead of providing a static summary, the "So What" conclusion is active—it moves readers from information to action.

## How To Write a "So What" Conclusion

The "So What" conclusion uses some or all of these three steps to achieve its purpose:

1. Clarify your goals—what it is that you want to happen as a result of reading your document
2. Show readers why your goals are in their best interest. Here you tune into the radio station that everyone listens to: WRIT-FM, What's Really In It For Me?
3. Suggest what they can do next

## Repetition

One last technique that can be used with any of the above: repeating something from your introduction in your conclusion in order to give a sense of wholeness, closure and drama. Repetition often appears most dramatically in articles/essays that attempt to share or teach—provide some insight or learning about the human condition. Nonetheless, repetition can be effective in a variety of nonfiction types.

What is being repeated? Usually your best stuff. It's the telling detail, the clever phrase, the image or word picture that seems to say it all. Take a look at this example: ["The Influence of Teachers"](#) by Jenna Farleigh.

Notice how the intro and conclusion pick up on the same phrasing about "life," "lessons," "teaching," "priceless," "wonderful," and "valuable." Most of all, notice how she takes the one detail about being "ready to go home at the end of the day" at the beginning and the end. Although she was working with a cliché theme (the teacher becomes the student), Jenna's use of detail brought the characters alive and, most of all, her intro and conclusion conspire to touch your heart—an effective that is achieved with the artistry of repetition.

### INTRO

Teachers come in a variety of different forms. During my junior year, I was bequeathed a most unlikely band of **"teachers."** Their names were Justin, Nephi, Mark and Reed. I met them shortly after I was given the opportunity to become the aide for their 9th grade P.E. class. During the short 45 minutes a day, these highly motivated students, at the ripe age of 14, provided me with more **valuable lessons** than a decade of formal instruction. They single handedly **taught me priceless lessons about life**, loss, and the desire it takes to succeed. ...

"...I recall on several occasions asking them at the end of an exhausting day as we were walking to the bus, "Are you ready to go home?" and hearing the deliberate reply, "No!"

### CONCLUSION

Too often neglected by others, these children learned to support each other. Stabilizing one another during the last lap around the school and rotating the wheelchair duties of their fellow comrade and friend, Justin, their encouragement never wavered. They always laughed, too! All of them had a way with enjoying the little things. They stole my nose and gave it back. They stole my heart and improved **my life**. I owe them a piece of my success and happiness. They showed me that anyone can be a **teacher** and **that life is full of learning**. I hope that during my job as a P.E. aide, I also **taught them**, yet I'm doubtful that I could ever give back the **wonderful gifts** they gave me. Because of their friendship, during the last semester, I too, was not ready to go home when the bell rang at the end of the day.

Here are some more student essays from the same "My Turn" contest. As an exercise,

point out the elements used by the authors to achieve an effective conclusion:

["Remembering Mike"](#) by Molly Dugan

["Is it Enough to Love"](#) by Mark Beyersdorf