



Conclusions:

Or, How to Wrap Up Your Paper without Repeating Yourself

By Amelia Keller

Conclusions can be one of the most difficult parts of a paper to write, but they do not need to be. By the time you reach the conclusion of your paper, you should have already made your main point through convincing sub-points with solid evidence and/or illustrations and by engaging with counterpoints. What then is left to do in the conclusion? It is a question that many composition students have fretted over.

Should you restate your thesis? Not exactly. If you simply repeat your thesis, this will sound redundant. Instead, you can briefly synthesize your argument. Show how the points that you have made throughout your paper connect to prove your overarching point. Your readers have already read your argument, so you do not need to summarize everything you've done in the paper. Instead, you can quickly connect all the dots, reaffirming for the reader that you have constructed a convincing, well thought out and well organized argument. Having a logical organization throughout the body of your paper will make quickly synthesizing your argument in your conclusion a much simpler process. By showing your reader how your argument fits together, you can often create new meaning without bringing in new information, making your conclusion memorable and avoiding redundancy.

You should not bring up wholly new points or evidence in your conclusion. This paragraph is where you are wrapping things up for your reader, not where you are squeezing in one last idea. If a new and interesting idea comes up in your conclusion, move it to the body of your essay where you can develop it fully and tie it in to the rest of your argument.

However, your conclusion can (and should!) leave your reader with a thought to take away. You might broaden the point you have made in your paper to show what its more general implications might be. Again, you are not bringing up a whole new point. You are instead suggesting what the further reaching implications of your argument may be. For example, suppose you have written a paper about Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story" where you show that "truth" in a war story is about the emotional response to the scenario, not about the accuracy of the details. In your paper, you explore how O'Brien manipulates the details to try to show non-veterans the "truth" of a situation they have not experienced. In your final sentences, you could gesture towards the more general significance of this issue:

"For people who have never experienced war, the 'truth' of a war story may always remain out of grasp. This lack of understanding can make adjustment to civilian life difficult for veterans, but is important to foster open communication about the experiences of war and the contradictory feelings of excitement, awe, loss and grief that war engenders. Without such civilian-veteran dialogue, to 'move on,' as O'Brien's elderly fan urged, remains an oversimplification of a complex problem."

(Keep reading on next page; there's more!)

Another option is to pose a question for further thought:

“The truth of a war story is therefore not about the accuracy of the details. It is a truth more basic and yet so much more difficult to put into words—the essence of a life altering experience. Anyone who has experienced trauma, war related or otherwise, can likely appreciate the contradiction posed by O’Brien’s story. What, then, can we as a society do to help veterans of our current wars adjust into a society that will not understand the truth of what they went through? That is the question O’Brien’s story ultimately poses. If the answer does not lie in valorizing war or looking for morals, we, as a culture, will have to find new answers.”

The passage above is also an example of using your conclusion as a call to action, another great strategy for making your final paragraph a powerful end to your paper. Be careful not to exaggerate, however. If you have written a paper about recycling, you do not want to equate separating out your aluminum cans to solving all the world’s environmental ills. But you can remind your reader that thinking about the small act of using a refillable water bottle can be one step towards a more sustainable consumer culture. Variations on this strategy include suggesting consequences, posing a warning, or looking toward the future.



Example:
Conclusions as Synthesis, Not Summary
+
Sample Transition Sentences

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Below you will find an outline of a sample paper followed by several ways you might chose to conclude. This example illustrates the difference between concluding with a redundant summary versus a conclusion that leaves the reader something new.

The sample outline also illustrates possible transitions, sentences that serve to guide readers through an essay, letting them know how each points connects back to, develops out of, extends, questions, or otherwise relates to the points that came before. Transitions make your reasoning and the logic of your argument readily visible to readers.

Introduction: Disney's *The Little Mermaid* is a beloved and classic children's cartoon. However, the potential political ramifications of this entertaining and supposedly lighthearted film should not be overlooked. Though Ariel may appear, at first glance, to be a great role model for young girls, she also embodies many problematic gender stereotypes that could adversely affect identity formation in children.

Hypothetical topic sentences are in italics to illustrate possible transitions.

Point 1: *The importance of children's media, especially Disney's enormously popular animated movies, should not be underrated.* Looks at Henry A. Giroux's "Children's Culture and Disney's Animated Films" to show the significance of and set up the context for the rest of the essay's argument. This paragraph would show why children's movies warrant critical reading and how movies, Disney ones especially, can affect the way children see themselves and their world.

Point 2: *Even when children are still too young grasp all of the plot and dialogue of the movie, the problematic nature of the film can be conveyed simply through the film's visual images and the connotations, both positive and negative, which the filmmakers give to these images.* Looks at the way the characters are animated, showing the unhealthy body image that Ariel's slightly anorexic figure presents as well as the way the way that Ursula could be seen as demonizing overweight women. This paragraph (or group of paragraphs) would also reference Giroux when talking about Ariel's figure but would go on expand his argument to also look at Ursula (*However, Ariel is not the only problematic female "figure" in the movie...*).

Point 3: *Ariel's physical attributes become even more problematic when the buxom Ursula transforms Ariel into a human and makes the former mermaid into an idealized sexual object.* This paragraph would look at how the movie constructs Ariel as silent (literally voiceless, unable to

give consent/refusal or speak her mind in any way) and sexually available (when a pair of legs is substituted for her tail...a point that the original Hans Christian Andersen tale makes much more explicitly).

Point 4: *Despite Ariel's problematic physical attributes, her independent and rebellious character at least offers the potential for a positive female role model.* This paragraph would give the counterargument to the previous paragraphs that what matters most is Ariel's mind, and that in this respect at least she is admirable as a free thinker who defies the patriarchal expectations of her underwater world to make her own destiny despite the risks that it entails.

Point 5: *Such a reading, however, would ignore the fact that Ariel's rebellious nature is only pushed to action in pursuit of a man, as well as the fact that once Ariel is a human, she becomes a basically passive participant in the actions that are determining her fate.* This paragraph would show that Ariel's actions, though admirable, stem from problematic motives. Giroux and his sources would be cited. However, their argument would be extended by looking at the following details: Ariel throws away her life, abandoning family and friends, for a man she barely knows, and once she is on land, her destiny is entirely controlled by when/if Eric will decide to kiss her.

Conclusion as Summary: Though Ariel appears at first to offer a positive role model, she actually embodies many negative stereotypes that are unhealthy for young girls. These problems include both her physical appearance and its comparison to Ursula's appearance, as well as the way that she is silenced at the moment when she is sexualized. Her character may appear rebellious and independent. However, the potential positive attributes of her character are mitigated by the way that her actions and desires are centered around the pursuit of a man whom is ultimately in control of her destiny. **[This conclusion just repeats what the paper already did. It is not yet adding to the paper's overall structure/argument.]**

Conclusion as Synthesis: Though Ariel does possess many admirable and redeeming qualities, she and the narrative she inhabits offer the potential to do much more harm than good. From cultivating negative body image, to condoning sexualized passivity, to confining Ariel to an ultimately subordinate role, there is much in Disney's *The Little Mermaid* that runs counter to the ideas we try to teach our daughters, nieces, students, etc. If Ariel were a teenager you knew, what advice would you give her? Whatever you would say, if she listened to you I bet the movie would have a different ending. So why do we hold up her story to generation after generation of young girls as an example of a magical happy ending? **[Posing Question for Further Thought]**

Alternate ways to conclude...

Just because it is an animated movie, does not mean that a film should be accepted as innocent entertainment. The lessons learned from analyzing *The Little Mermaid* should be applied to all children's media. The results might surprise you. **[Generalizing Out to Show Broader Significance]**

Understanding the potential negative messages in classic children's movies is only the first step towards changing the messages we offer to a new generation of children. We also need to exercise our power as consumers of movie tickets, DVDs, and merchandise to choose positive role models and reject negative ones. Only through changing what we are willing to buy will we begin to change what media corporations are likely to offer. **[Call to Action]**