



WFP

• promoting excellence in writing & communication •

westpoint.edu/wpwp • usma.mywconline.com

Parting Gifts

CREATING EFFECTIVE, MEANINGFUL CONCLUSIONS

CDT Langdon Ogburn ('21)

You finally made it. You dug through your sources to find that one quotation your instructor had mentioned in class. After thirty minutes of thinking, you finally hit on an idea that filled that last 400 words. You finalized a thesis that integrated the various key components of your paper's argument. But you aren't done just yet. You still have a conclusion to write. Too easy, you say. You can just summarize your paper in 4-5 sentences and call it a day, right?

Wrong, my friend! You have just spent many hours of your life creating a new and unique argument—a perspective on a subject all your own. After all that time, why just mail in the rest?

Your conclusion is your opportunity to drive your points home and emphatically underscore to your audience why they matter. Usually they matter for reasons far beyond the scope of what you've actually written: after all, what would be the purpose of proving a point that is completely irrelevant outside of your own paper?

Now you probably have a different question: can my conclusion do two things at once? can it both (1) wrap up the ideas found in my paper while also (2) showing the audience that my unique argument has meaning beyond what I've written? The answer: yes—absolutely! The best conclusions often have two parts: reiteration and application. It can help to think of conclusions as *parting gifts* to your audience: the complete package includes a concise, direct recapping of your core argument (*reiteration*) followed by a limited but thoughtful explanation of its relevance to a concern outside of the paper itself (*application*). Now that's a perfect ending.



Part 1: Reiteration (*Tying it all Together*)

The first part of your conclusion is generally where you tie up what you wrote in your essay into a nice, pretty bow. The length here can vary, but in one-paragraph conclusions it is usually about one-third to one-half of your total paragraph (about 2-3 sentences).

In some ways, this section is akin to your thesis statement: it too offers a concise overview of your argument or position. However, the concluding reiteration serves a different function than a thesis statement. A thesis tells the reader what you are going to argue and how you are going to argue it. Your concluding reiteration, by contrast, conveys similar information but from a different perspective: it should focus on telling the reader what they have learned by reading your paper and why they should believe your argument or endorse your position.

Part 2: Application (*Explaining Relevance to an Outside Element*)

After you have effectively reiterated your core argument or position to the reader, it's time for the real meat of the conclusion: explaining why the points you have made contribute something new and useful to the world.

To do so, you have to take the idea you created, which up until now has existed only in the context of your paper, and *apply* it to an *outside element*—some other concern or circumstance that your paper has not previously mentioned (or at least not explored in detail). First, you'll have to briefly introduce this outside element, but then you'll cut right to applying your idea or position to it. According your own ideas priority here is key to success: instead of using an outside element to draw conclusions about your idea, use *your* idea to draw conclusions about the outside element.

Here's an example from an EN102 (Literature) essay of mine where all of this, reiteration as well as application to an outside element, comes together. The example isn't perfect—what writing from anyone's first year in college is?—but it will help you to get the idea...

Ultimately, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* show how individual ambition can never be truly satisfied. Specifically, Shakespeare suggests that if individuals allow their political ambitions to supersede their morality they will find themselves in a never-ending state of regret and mental torment. Today, unlike characters in his plays, most people no longer gain political power simply by murdering others. However, it is certainly possible to gain political power by ignoring moral codes: for instance, in the wake of the 2010 Supreme Court decision *Citizens United v. FEC* politicians may now receive unlimited amounts of money from individuals, interest groups, or corporations—and money almost always comes expectations or strings attached. This makes it all too easy for individuals to gain power by putting the interests of those with money ahead of either those they are supposed to represent or what they believe to be truly right and just. Shakespeare's plays demonstrate that such actions are not without consequence, that no politician is safe from the negative effects they bring. The fates of Claudius and Macbeth serve to say it simply is not worth it: the unprincipled pursuit of power will corrupt anyone and guarantee only a lack of fulfillment and ruined conscience.

First comes reiteration. Short and sweet—to the point. Just two sentences summarize the key takeaway from the paper's analysis of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*.

Next, comes the outside element. In this conclusion, it is a Supreme Court case, which at first might seem to have nothing to do with either Shakespearean work. By giving only the minimum necessary information here, though, the conclusion can cut quickly to explaining its relevance.

Lastly, the application is fully realized. This section connects the essay's key idea or argument to the outside element. Now that the idea is proven to be compelling—your audience should be on board with your argument by this juncture—it can be used to draw other conclusions and demonstrate its utility beyond the bounds of your own paper.

Need help thinking about applications for your argument? Here are just a few directions to consider:

- ♦ **A current or historical event.** It is often said that history doesn't repeat itself but that it rhymes. Explaining how your idea or position enhances our understanding of a specific past or current event will show your reader that your points have additional implications beyond just those explored in your essay.
- ♦ **What the world would look like if your idea or position was put into place.** This direction is especially useful if your paper makes claims about how things should be instead of how they are. If the U.S. Congress passed a law tomorrow that made your position into law, what would happen? How would things be better or worse off?
- ♦ **The larger context of the discipline.** Be cautious here: a conclusion only has so much room and this direction risks spilling into more substantial analysis. But there can be a high reward, too: the idea with this direction is to explain how your argument adds nuance to or challenges either big-picture assumptions in the discipline or a specific argument another expert has made about your subject.