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Writing an Effective Conclusion

The end of an essay is something to celebrate. You managed to craft a clear historical argument, support it with evidence, and finish one more assignment on your to-do list. But do you ever find yourself dreading those last few sentences? How can you emphasize your thesis without copying the introduction word-for-word? This handout is here to help. Writing a conclusion should be a satisfying process that elevates your essay by tying together your central claims. The best conclusions also point to the broader significance of your essay. In sum, a concluding paragraph looks backward at what you wrote and outward to the broader significance of what you have written—and gets you one step closer to the end of a semester.

Step 1: Before you write a conclusion, answer the following questions:

- **What did I want to prove in this essay? Or, what was my thesis?**
- **How did I prove my thesis? What evidence did I use, and how did I present it?**
- **What is the broader significance of what I have written?**

Your answers to these questions provide content for your conclusion. They also give you an opportunity to review your essay and make sure that you supported the argument you intended to make. A concluding paragraph is useful to both the writer and the reader.

Step 2: Now that you know the content of your conclusion, rewrite your answers in complete sentences that differ from those in your introduction:

Think about the conclusion as the end of a journey. After telling your readers where you intended to take them in an introduction, you trekked through paragraphs full of historical context and textual analysis in the essay's body. The end of an essay is a very different place from the beginning, and your conclusion can refer to that journey in ways that the introduction could not.

For example:

- **Introductory thesis:** After observing the actions of poor and upper-class Americans, middle-class progressives fashioned a concept of justice that emphasized moral righteousness and frugality
- **Concluding thesis:** In personal correspondence and published works, middle-class progressives wrote thousands of pages condemning the lifestyles of poor and upper-class Americans. They used their criticisms, including charges of sexual promiscuity and

wasteful consumption, to characterize justice as a goal that could be achieved only by those who lived a morally upright life defined by fiscal restraint.

Rather than simply restating your introductory thesis, the conclusion amplifies that thesis by making use of the information you presented in the body of your paper.

Step 3: Add what you have identified as the broader significance of your essay. This way your essay will end with a conclusion that points to why what you have written matters. You might ask yourself, “Why and how do my conclusions about middle-class progressives help us to understand the time period or U.S. history more broadly?”

- **Example:** In personal correspondence and published works, middle-class progressives wrote thousands of pages condemning the lifestyles of poor and upper-class Americans. They used their criticisms, including charges of sexual promiscuity and wasteful consumption, to characterize justice as a goal that could only be achieved by those who lived a morally upright life defined by fiscal restraint. To this day, fiscal restraint is a defining aspect of moral fortitude in the United States. One might think to contemporary debates about welfare as an indication of the lasting impact middle-class progressives have had on American life.*

*Note: While this conclusion makes a reference to the modern era, this type of reference is not always appropriate in history papers. In this instance, it is likely that the professor drew connections to contemporary debates throughout the course or encouraged their students to do so. When in doubt, ask your professor if a contemporary reference is appropriate.