

## WRITING EFFECTIVE CONCLUSIONS

Though the final paragraph in an essay is commonly referred to as the conclusion, it is not traditionally the place in which the author draws new conclusions that were not mentioned previously in the essay. Rather, the goal of an essay's conclusion is to bring the paper full circle by revisiting the large-scale ideas stated in the introduction, but with the refined perspective created by the preceding arguments in the body of the paper. Conclusions often return to the thesis—which the preceding essay has attempted to make compelling—in an attempt to briefly assess its significance in some larger context.

### Conceptual Components

***Revisiting the Thesis*** – Just as the preceding body paragraphs have drawn more general conclusions from specific pieces of evidence, the concluding paragraph of an essay reestablishes the essay's main claim, which has been built on the more specific sub-claims argued throughout the body. Though the thesis is generally reintroduced in the first sentence of the conclusion, the remainder of the paragraph should ensure that its content moves beyond simply restating the ideas in the introduction.

***Recontextualization*** – Just as your introduction acts as a bridge that transports your readers from their own lives into the textual space of your analysis, your conclusion provides a bridge to help your readers make the transition back to their daily lives. This is done most effectively by emphasizing a context for your ideas that makes them relevant or meaningful for your reader. This can include summarizing how your argument contributes to existing research, identifying a new question for further inquiry, or suggesting a new course of action based on your findings.

### Structural Components

***Evolved Thesis*** – Using different language than the introduction, most conclusions restate the essay's main claim in the first sentence. This allows the concluding paragraph to avoid simply reproducing the introduction in which the thesis is usually stated near the end. Restating the paper's overall argument at the beginning of the conclusion sets up a brief exploration of your essay's larger context or broader implications in the final paragraph.

***Evolved Motive*** – In guiding your readers out of the textual space of your paper, it is important to remind them why your arguments are significant. You don't want your readers to finish your paper thinking "so what?" To prevent this, use your conclusion to reestablish the significance of your thesis.

***Limitation*** – Qualifying or acknowledging the limitations of your argument, while optional, can be an effective way of clarifying the scope of your thesis, particularly in an essay that defends a rather ambitious claim. Acknowledging that there are questions that need further research or that your argument is unlikely to convince those who approach the topic with a different set of assumptions is also a useful strategy for bolstering your credibility.

***Look Ahead*** – Because an essay is a small part of a larger discourse on its topic, a common move made in conclusions is to describe how the main claim may serve as a stepping stone for further research. Implicitly you are saying, "Now that I have proven the thesis of my essay, what new questions can we ask about this topic?" In a way, looking ahead to a new question does the work of the three previous components: proposing new areas of inquiry reinforces that you have proven your *thesis*; showing that, with further research, your claims could have broader implications *remotivates* your argument; acknowledging that other questions still remain acknowledges the *limitations* of your central claim.

***Final Thought*** – Since it is the last thing they will read, you want your final sentence to stick in your readers' minds. Whether you choose to end with emphasis, wit, or wonder, your final sentence should be memorable in some way without departing significantly from the overall tone of your essay.

## ANALYSIS OF A SAMPLE CONCLUSION

**Evolved Motive** – The motive of the conclusion is similar to the motive stated in the introduction: without cultivating a fuller understanding of how exactly photography has “systemically suppress[ed]” its relationship with ecology, it is impossible to have “a truly ecological photography—that is, a photography that contributes to the fullness of its circulations and effects to planetary health.” Put differently, the author motivates their argument based on transparency. Photography is a medium in which trust is currency: the viewer trusts a photograph is an objective or at least approximate representation of some dimension of reality. At the same time, there are undisclosed realities that photographs can conceal. This disjunction between perceived and hidden truth leaves room for pictures to become powerful but deceptive tools. The essay's conclusion reaffirms the author's desire for greater transparency about the masked environmental truths of photography so that viewers of pictures and practitioners of the art form can be more fully aware of the medium's present impact and future trajectory.

**Limitation** – In his essay, the author details how even though photography as a medium creates a host of ecological concerns, it has in the past been used to draw attention to these same problems. In his conclusion, the author imitates this framework, crediting the medium for advancing common understanding and awareness of ecological issues in the past. Conceding to photography's usefulness in driving environmental awareness increases the author and strengthens his argument. He does not seek “to denigrate the technology” indiscriminately. Instead, he hopes “to develop a more honest relationship” with how it affects the environment so that it might better protect the world it seeks to depict.

**Look Ahead** – Instead of presenting different avenues to research photography's material and environmental basis, the author uses the conclusion to state the costs of continued ignorance. The result is a sighted cluelessness, where nature has been supplanted by the idea of nature itself and “the image world becomes the only world we know.” This move is effective considering how the author structures the body of his essay. These paragraphs detailing photography's often exploitative reliance on the natural world include images including “Earthrise” and landscapes by photographers like Ansel Adams. The author's deconstruction of the environmental impact of photography pushes against the instinctive temptation to indulge the “fantasies of mere witnessing” when seeing photographs of the natural world.

**Evolved Thesis** – The opening sentence of the conclusion restates the essay's thesis that “photographs, as matters of habit, commerce, and pleasure, are structured...to disregard the material apparatus that produced them” and that it is time to look “at” photography rather than “through” it to understand the mediums relationship to environmental issues. The opening sentence also reestablishes the tension inherent in this thesis between the photography as a medium used to depict ecology and nature while the photography of ecology” while “neglect[ing] the ecology of photography, the material effects that photography has on the biosphere.” Restating the thesis reminds readers of the stakes of ignoring the author's argument and introduces an avenue for the author to explore his argument's broader implications in the sentences to come.

Turning photography toward its social and material basis has an ecological value. As long as photography systematically suppresses that basis, it will sacrifice the world in favor of the image. The use of photographic tokens to signify the value of nature inevitably shifts that value toward photography itself. This in turn leaves nature prone to substitution by other sources of visual delight and spectacular fascination. The image world becomes the only world we know. Photography that offers fantasies of mere witnessing may have done valuable work in the twentieth century, but it seems structurally unprepared to meet the ecological needs of the twenty-first. Photography cannot reckon with the world's ecology honestly until it acknowledges its own.

**Final Thought** – The author's closing sentence rings out as both an indictment and a warning. The author asserts that photography has unfinished business with its past. Its history of masking and contributing to worsening ecological and environmental conditions is made apparent through the author's essay. Whether this is made evident by the massive amounts of waste produced by both traditional and digital photography or through photography's artistically constructed fiction of American landscapes as “a welcoming Eden” without reference to “the genocidal displacement of Indigenous peoples,” photography has a legacy with which it must contend. Secondly, the closing sentence outlines the risks of not dealing with such history. Ignoring it will render any positive effect the medium might have as it relates to environmental issues null. Self-reflection and self-criticism are essential to the survival of both the medium and the world.