CHAPTER 12
WRITE THE CONCLUSION

The conclusion is "that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it," says Aristotle. A curious claim—almost self-evident, isn't it? And yet his statement is actually charged with meaning. A good conclusion should be the exact opposite of a non sequitur; it should be the logical conclusion of the preceding points and the fruition of the argument as a whole. Likewise, the thesis should not merely stop, as if a person speaking with you over the telephone were suddenly cut off. Rather, it should end artfully, just as a good conversation has both a sense of completion and the expected politenesses that signal its closing.

We can think of the thesis much like we think of a typical story, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Or, perhaps even more like your own thesis, think of a jury trial. What do both stories and jury trials do? They introduce some sort of complication or issue and then, at the end, resolve it. Likewise, the thesis should alert the audience to a problem and then, at the end, offer a solution.

Your conclusion will not be "and they lived happily ever after," but it should nonetheless cause your audience to breathe the satisfied sigh of having reached their destination. This is not to suggest that everyone will be happy about that destination, but they should all feel that they have arrived at the end of a journey that appears to have only this as its rational terminus. Concerning the content of your thesis, your conclusion should answer any lingering question of "What next?" as well as leave your audience poised for action that would result from your presentation.

We'll write the conclusion in three parts: the summary, the closing, and the call to action.

The first part of the conclusion we will work on is the summary. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle gives some handy advice: The conclusion should provide a recap of the entire argument. Because your thesis argument is an especially long address, you'll certainly want to heed his advice by reviewing your main points. Never mind that you know your thesis practically word for word; the truth is that even those people who were listening most attentively would have difficulty restating your main points, so by recapping your points, you will be helping everyone. Of course, you aren't going to be repeating everything a second time—only reviewing the major lines of reasoning. The summary you provide should be brief and clear. And while the summary should reinforce and crystallize your points, it is no place to add new arguments.

Another thing that the summary does is signal to your audience that you are nearing the end of your presentation. This cue reminds them to tune in, to pay attention and pick up pieces they may have dropped along the way. (Think of the end of a flight: Your conclusion is like that announcement telling you to “make sure that all tray tables are stowed and seats are in the upright position.”) But the summary has one further purpose, too: It provides a vista, a bird’s-eye view of the thesis, which should reveal the form of the argument as a whole. And form is a beautiful thing! After all, it is the entire thesis—its intelligibility and its coherence—that should prove persuasive, not just one or two particular parts.

Here are a couple of templates you might find useful:

“We have explored __________. Then we moved on to consider __________. Finally, we ended with an analysis of __________.”

“First I spoke to you about __________, which led to a consideration of __________. In examining __________, we logically were compelled to analyze __________.”
Chapter 12—Write the Conclusion \(\textit{peroratio}\)

"This activity works very well in one class period. Set a timer, and have students cover up the other prompts, concentrating only on the one at hand."

Chapter 3 of Edward P.J. Corbett's \textit{Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student} offers more food for thought on the conclusion. This resource is highly recommended for every rhetoric teacher.

**WORKSHOP:**

\textit{The Artful Closing}

Now that you have written your summary, you are ready to add the closing. Think of the closing as the "aha!" moment, the dessert at the end of a meal, the grand finale in the fireworks show, the neat bow tying off the knot of your argument.

How do you accomplish this? In this section, you will write three different closings, each of a different stripe. Set a timer for ten or fifteen minutes. When the timer goes off, allow yourself a few more minutes to wrap up if needed; then move on to the next prompt. The same rule applies here as with the introductions: Don't peek ahead! Fully give yourself over to each prompt, one at a time; you can later judge which is the best suited to your purposes.

**CLOSING 1: Insight into the Human Condition**

The first type we will write is the "Insight into the Human Condition" closing. The idea is that you take everything that you've been arguing and boil it down to why this matters to humankind. You can speculate on the underlying human significance of what might otherwise seem to be an isolated problem, or you can reveal the deeper, latent implications of the predicament.

Maybe on the surface, with the problems of poverty and war and famine that the world faces, it doesn't seem to be such a big deal if, say, families don't eat meals together anymore, supposing that family mealtime is the subject of your thesis. But does the breakdown of the family mealtime signal a deeper problem—the breakdown of the family, which is the foundation of civilization? Or maybe it feels that, in the grand scheme of things, it matters very little whether schools adopt standards-based grading, another possible thesis subject. But could the adoption of a new grading system recast the entire purpose of education while offering hope to the very types of students who need it most? Think of this closing as that point in a visit to the hospital when the doctor, having considered all the patient's symptoms, offers a diagnosis of the disorder.

Ask yourself these questions: Why does my issue really matter? What are the deeper implications of my issue, however seemingly small the issue itself may appear on the surface? Does it bear upon larger human issues, or does it reveal deeper problems?

Jot your thoughts on those questions below.
Now turn those thoughts into a closing that frames your issue with the big picture—the larger context of the human condition.

Example:

Socrates famously said that the unexamined life is not worth living. But we also might quip, as one scholar has recently done, that the unlived life is not worth examining. In the end, the issue of automation is not just a matter of robots or software taking human jobs. It is not just a matter of the economy, as important as that may be. No, it is a matter of being humans, of living within constraints of time and space, of being able to say at the end of the day, “This was a day well lived.” What does it mean to live a day well? It means that humans engage their wills, they tackle problems and solve them, they help others, they accomplish something. In other words, it means we work. Work, then, is not a bad thing; it is a necessary thing for human flourishing. It may not be sufficient—that is, we need more than work to live well; we need food and shelter and loving relationships and religion and health—but it is necessary. And now it may be time to redefine the place of work in a life well lived.

Now you try it!

CLOSING 2: Pathos Plea

It is only natural that pathos, or emotion, may be heavy in your closing. After all, the entire thesis should be a natural movement from one appeal to the next: It begins by establishing the speaker’s credibility (ethos), then moves to the logic of the arguments and counterarguments (logos), and ideally ends with stirred emotions (pathos) that motivate the audience to change their views, if not their lives. Of course, the three appeals actually occur to different degrees in all parts of the thesis, but the overall movement is ethos to logos to pathos.
But closing with emotion may feel to you like a cheap trick. After all, isn’t this manipulative? The answer is, “It depends.” If you have presented your arguments both ethically and logically—having established your credibility and built a reasonable and accurate case—it is not necessarily manipulative to draw in emotions. In fact, omitting emotions might be the more unethical move! Why? Because we, as human beings, are emotional creatures, and if we speak of true evil—say, the taking of innocent lives or other grave injustices—without appropriate emotions, then we are neglecting the kind of visceral logic that the emotions rightly exercise on us. Even if we speak truthfully about injustice, we risk misrepresenting its gravity by doing so dispassionately or coldly. In other words, emotions can help us think straight; they are the counterpart, not the enemy, to reason. Our emotions are not infallible; it’s true, and they certainly can be manipulated for unjust purposes. They do, however, play an important role in the way we experience and make sense of the world. Ignoring them, therefore, is no solution.

This closing, then, sometimes requires nothing more than finding an emotional point or story already in your thesis draft and simply moving it to the end. Another place to check is the various introductions that you wrote in the previous chapter; were any of them especially moving or inspiring? Consider closing, rather than opening, with one that is emotionally charged.

Finally, consider using one of these possibilities:

- An anecdote—a true story that you ran across in researching your issue
- A personal testimonial detailing what your issue means to you
- Startling statistics that show just how important or problematic your issue is
- An imagined and detailed scenario that predicts what life will be like if your thesis issue goes unaddressed

Example:

What if we do nothing? What if we trust that all will be well, that the market will sort itself out, that the economy will stabilize, that enough new jobs will be created to make up for the old ones that are being automated? And what if we are wrong? Then people may suffer—not just some people, but people we all know, perhaps even ourselves. The bottom tier of the economy may suffer because these people would have no jobs, and the top tier of the economy may suffer because fewer people would have money to buy their goods.

Csikszentmihalyi’s study reveals that work—even when we believe we do not enjoy it—makes us happier than we are when we are relaxing. Happiness may elude us because humans are not ready for the kind of leisure leaves that may soon be available to them. When the average American spends about five hours a day watching TV (Kabler), what would that number be if there were no work to be done? When the total amount of media time a person consumes is ten hours and thirty-nine minutes per day, do we think that number would increase or decrease if jobs were gone? Yes, the economic plan of a universal basic income is interesting, and it remains to be seen what governments will do in terms of legislating the brave new world ahead. But even if we can fix the economic problems that rampant automation may bring, human happiness will not necessarily be any closer; in fact, it may be further away.

2. See chapter 3 in Rhetoric Alive! Book 1: Principles of Persuasion for more on the legitimate use of the emotions.
Now you try it! Identify the emotion your audience needs to feel in order for your thesis to “stick.” Do they need to feel angry, fearful, indignant, confident, etc.? Write that emotion here: ____________ Now your goal is to write a closing that stirs that particular emotion.

CLOSING 3: Tail-Biting Snake

This technique—also known as “ouroboros”—is a favorite, and for good reason: Simply by way of structure, your thesis is wrapped up with a neat bow. As the name “tail-biting snake” suggests, the thesis will end where it began. That is, you take the story or quote or idea that you used to begin your thesis, and you return to it in your closing. The inevitable feeling for the audience in hearing the echo is a sense of completion, of finality. In fact, Western music does this all the time; a song will begin on a note, then create tension by wandering away from it, and will finally resolve that tension by coming back to rest on the very same note.³

The wonderful surprise to this technique is that the audience, just as listeners with a musical work, will experience the very same quote (or idea or story) differently that second time around. In other words, the journey of your thesis has meant something; the audience returns to the starting point but now all the wiser, having learned a great deal about the issue in the meantime. This is the idea behind a beautiful line by T.S. Eliot: “The end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.”

One of the most powerful ways to frame your thesis is to use introduction 2 (“Half a Story”), and then to complete the story as your closing. For instance, suppose a speaker has opened with the story of a baby laid on the steps of a public building in the bustling Chinese city of Gao’An. She then goes on to discuss the former “one-child” rule in China and to offer a new vision for international adoption. Her closing could be the rest of the story. The surprising twist? The baby was the speaker; she was found and brought to an orphanage, from which she was adopted by her American mother and father. Please be careful if you choose

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³ Jeremy Begbie uses the term “home/away/home” to describe this musical pattern. See *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
such an emotionally powerful conclusion. We humans are very sensitive to emotional manipulation, and none of us like it. So while this can be an extremely effective way to conclude your thesis (in this real-life example, this story worked marvelously!), it must be earned. To go for the emotional "knockout" without having taken the necessary preparations can jeopardize your credibility and undermine your entire argument.

Cast your eyes back over the various introductions you wrote, and see whether any of them would work for this frame technique. Can you return to your story (introductions 1 or 2) or "Imagine . . ." (introductions 3 or 4)? What about returning to the series of questions (introduction 5)? If you started by painting a scene, consider returning to that series of images here in the closing (introduction 6). Would the surprising statistics (introduction 7) be more meaningful now that you have given your audience a broader context for your issue? The same goes for the "Great Text Connection" excerpt: It may work well to conclude or pick up with the very same quote (introduction 8).
Finally, the conclusion should do more than summarize your arguments and offer a pleasant closing. It should tell the audience why your speech should change their lives. In a sense, your audience won’t know what has been at stake until the end. It is here that you take all the ethos you have built up, the logos you have appealed to, and the pathos you have stirred, and you bring it to the head of a pin: a call to action.

Students sometimes make the mistake of thinking that awareness is enough: “I just want people to be aware of such-and-such,” they say. Awareness is a good thing, to be sure, but awareness in itself doesn’t amount to much. Making your audience aware of the shortage of clean water around the world doesn’t help a single person who is in need of the precious resource. Rather, knowledge should lead to action. It is not enough to fill up your audience’s mind with new facts and figures. The goal is to make your thesis relevant to their lives and have the audience do something with this new information; that is, it is a move out of the theoretical and into the practical. If you have given a talk on the history of medicine, from its ancient origins to germ theory and now to modern surgical techniques, you must ask yourself what difference this information should make in a person’s life. Should he adopt a different approach the next time he visits his family practitioner? If your thesis presentation explored the value of working with one’s hands, then what should the thoughtful audience member do tomorrow—start a garden, take a woodworking class?4

Remember, judicial (or “forensic”) rhetoric is speech about justice, oriented toward the past, and epideictic (or “ceremonial”) rhetoric is speech of praise or blame. Your thesis presentation will certainly include sections that are epideictic and judicial rhetoric. In the end, however, these two types of rhetoric should be brought to bear upon the future; this is done in a call to action. In other words, the senior thesis presentation is an example of deliberative rhetoric, speech that is ultimately geared toward changing people’s actions as they move into the future. The special focus of deliberative rhetoric is expediency; your job is to answer your audience’s question: “What is the good that I desire that this thesis will help supply? What is the advantageous course of action?”

It is now time to ask yourself, “What do I wish my audience to do differently after leaving my thesis presentation? What concrete actions can they take as a result?” Use the space below to brainstorm some ideas.

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4. There are usually two go-to answers to the “call to action” question. The first is this call to awareness: “I just want my audience members to think differently about this topic.” The second is a political call: “Vote.” Students tend to rush to political solutions for almost every kind of problem. And, granted, your thesis may be calling for a political answer. But besides that, what can an individual audience member do differently? How can an individual person take your thesis and apply it to his or her daily life? Be careful to consider how you can creatively call your audience to real and personal changes in their lives.