

# A Few Words by Way of Conclusion

**W**HEN I teach first-year writing, I'm always surprised by how much time I have to spend on one element of my students' essays: the conclusion. Students either neglect to write one entirely or repeat (sometimes word-for-word) what they've written in their introductions. I try to get them to see an essay's final paragraph as an opportunity to sum up, to draw conclusions, and to point forward to further questions beyond the scope of the current piece.

But for all of my harping on the importance of a good conclusion in students' writing, I rarely give even a moment's thought to how I conclude each class. Why is this?

All of the reasons that we urge students to put thought into the way that they conclude their papers apply to our pedagogy as well. In many ways, when we teach, we are making arguments to our students: We work to persuade them that the subject matter is significant, that our take on it is accurate, that it is worth their time to put in the work necessary to learn. Perhaps the layout of a class period should mirror the construction of an essay, with an introduction, the main body of the argument, and a conclusion that draws everything together. At the very least, it's worth reserving the last few minutes of every class period to sum up what you've handled that day, highlight a few of the most important ideas, and briefly discuss what's in store for the next class meeting.

Even better, I think, is an idea put across in the most recent issue of *College Teaching* by Robert Hampel, a professor of education at the University of Delaware. Hampel builds on a commonly cited teaching tip: to end each class by asking students to respond, in writing, to a couple of pointed questions about the day's lecture and/or discussion. These questions can be as specific or as general as you'd like. Ken Bain, author of

*What the Best College Teachers Do* (Harvard University Press, 2004), suggests asking students: "What major conclusions have you drawn from today's class/reading/discussion?" And: "What questions remain in your mind?"

Similarly, you can end each class with a quiz on the day's material. This can be useful even if this is as far as the exercise goes: Just the act of reflection, especially if it's through writing, can help cement the day's content in students' minds.

But Hampel goes further. He asks students a couple of questions, collects the responses, and reads them after class. Then he begins the next class period by summarizing those answers, exploring their implications, and using them to provoke a discussion that leads into the next topic. The process constructs a natural bridge between class periods, tying up the loose ends of one class while laying the foundation for the next. And it encourages further participation by demonstrating that students' views are taken seriously. It also gives instructors opportunities to see if students are understanding what they should be, and to quickly correct any misperceptions they hold. It's a great idea.

So then, to sum up: Make the effort to consciously conclude your classes. Allow those conclusions to show how your teaching connects from one class period to the next. Make students an integral part of the course's progress, and ensure that they will draw the conclusions you hope they'll draw. ■

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