The Nuts and Bolts of Structure
by Michael Harvey http://nutsandbolts.washcoll.edu/structure.html

The Basic Blueprint

Essays have a basic blueprint with three main parts: a beginning, a middle, and an ending. The beginning should engage the reader's attention, state the argument, and provide an essential context so the reader has a sense of "so what?" It should do more than say something like this: This essay will look at Amazon.com. A good introduction should pose a problem: Jeff Bezos became a billionaire after founding Amazon.com in 1995, but his company has yet to make a penny of profit. How did Amazon get so big so fast? Can it sustain its remarkable growth? And will Amazon and scores of other high-profile dot-coms ever become profitable—or are they built on a flawed business model?

After the beginning, the middle is where you actually make your argument—where you grapple with the problem you've introduced. Here's where you bring in background material, tell your story in detail, and work through the argument step by step. These logical steps typically unfold in paragraphs or clusters of paragraphs (whole chapters, in a book).

Finally, the ending is where you remind your reader of what you argued, and make some larger point that sends him off with a satisfied feeling that he's learned something worth learning, that he hasn't wasted his time.

The simplicity of this structure is kind of reassuring: it means that you already know how to design good essays. But the simplicity of this standard design also poses a difficulty for you, because it means that to your reader there's nothing immediately distinctive about your essay. The frame—introduction, body, conclusion—is so general that your reader is going to need a lot more guidance to get through your particular argument.

The Beginning

If you've only got an hour to write an essay spend a half-hour on the first paragraph and thesis statement. Okay, that's an exaggeration, but not by much. The opening is a critically important part of the essays. It's where your reader will meet your argument for the first time. It's your best (and often only) opportunity to lay out your argument, to give your reader a chance to see where you're going to try to take him. And it's reality check time for you: here's where all your grand visions for the essay start turning into reality. What you mention or don't mention in the beginning determines the main shape of your argument.
I find writing opening paragraphs very difficult, because I'm writing and thinking at two different levels. On one level, a deeper level of argument, I try to begin with the key facts I need to set up in order to engage my reader. That forces me to figure out what the key facts are. Names? Dates? Definitions? Context? Conventional scholarly opinion, which I'll either work within or react against? Particular scholar I'm drawing on? Key moment in a larger chain of events? Three main questions drive me: (1) What's my topic? (2) What's my thesis? (3) What do I need to tell my reader right away?

On a more superficial level, I also need to figure out exactly how to start. With a quotation? A question? An anecdote? A surprising finding? A paradox or puzzle? Whatever I choose, if I'm writing well it'll be in sync with the deeper level of thinking I'm working on—the particular detail, image, quotation or whatever else will fit with my thesis, my whole argument. For instance, if I'm writing about the fall from grace of many Internet dot-coms, I might start with a particular example—say Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon.com, and I might choose as a starting point to make a sharp contrast between his zenith (Time's man of the year in 1999) and the subsequent swoon in Amazon's stock price (down by two-thirds in half a year as I write this).

An opening paragraph establishes a context for your exposition. If you are discussing an author, what is his or her full name? Is the time period you're discussing relevant? Is there a general scholarly tradition or conventional wisdom you're going to be working with, or reacting against? You don't need to cram every significant fact into the opening paragraph, but it's a natural place to put as much critical info as reasonably fits.

Here's an introductory paragraph that doesn't really clarify what the essay will be about. The writer was obviously looking for a way to start writing, and didn't cold-bloodedly ask herself, "What do I need to explain in order to make my argument?" After we read this paragraph, we have little idea what argument this essay will try to make:

Americans too often take their rights for granted. We hardly ever stop to think about all of the hard work that was involved in gaining the rights we enjoy under the Constitution. This Constitution was not ratified overnight. It took many years and a great amount of persuasion through a document called the Federalist papers to get the states to accept the Constitution. The Federalist papers were written by a group of men who were dedicated to the principles of the Constitution. They believed in the republican form of government, and did not trust democracy. The Federalists knew that under a democracy it is harder for a nation to include a large region of people in government assembly, and there is a greater risk that majorities and factions will form.

Is this essay about how difficult it was to ratify the Constitution? Is it about the anti-democratic views of the writers of the Federalist papers? Is it about the dangers of
democracy? By the end, the paragraph seems to have moved past an introduction into a specific treatment of terms that haven't been defined yet, like faction, and some apparently important difference between democracy and the republican form of government. But we're not sure if our understanding of these things gibes with that of the author. And we still don't know what the argument is.

Here's an introductory paragraph that hasn't jelled:

Machiavelli incorporated many of his views towards religion into some of his works. There are three specific works, out of the many that he wrote, that deal specifically with Christianity. The three works, The Prince, The Discourses, and "The Golden Ass," each deal with various views he holds about modern religion. Machiavelli felt as though modern religion makes people weaker, is very political, and also causes people not to care for or defend their freedom.

At the end of the paragraph the writer delivers a thesis, but it's a grab-bag of ideas, not clearly connected to what's come before except in a very general way. The writer hasn't set up the thesis, told us how the things mentioned at the end relate to each other, or given us any sense of where the paper is going.

Here's an introductory paragraph that fails to give the reader a unified thesis. I've marked two possible theses:

In The Discourses, Machiavelli expresses strong feelings about Christianity. He says Christianity is weak because it does not practice the art of war. Any religion that does not practice the art of war is not destined to survive. Machiavelli believes that Christianity does not favor freedom, makes people slothful, and was unsuccessful in wiping out older religions.

All of the things the writer says here may well be true. But they're not organized in any helpful way. First one sentence comes at us like a thesis. The next sentence supports our understanding of this as the thesis. But then we get to the last sentence, which suddenly asserts itself as the "real" thesis. But this would-be thesis mentions three things, none of them obviously connected to the previous two sentences (except that they share a single topic, Christianity). The middle part of the paragraph, in other words, doesn't prepare us for the thesis. So where's the thesis? More plainly, what exactly is this writer trying to say? She has nailed down the topic: Machiavelli's attitude toward Christianity. But she has failed to deliver a focused thesis. (The solution, incidentally, may well lie in integrating these various specific points into a general observation on Machiavelli's view of Christianity—but that will require additional thinking, not just jiggering with the opening paragraph.)
A last point on first paragraphs: sometimes a writer, feeling that the opening must sound like an opening, writes something formal, impersonal, and inert. Even strong writers fall into this trap. The following example is from an essay that on the whole was full of strong verbs and good, strong writing. The writer, concerned to establish a formal tone at the beginning, wrote a passage chock full of nominalizations and weak verbs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>Revision</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This paper will seek to analyze the privatization effort of Ukraine and come to a conclusion about the factors contributing to the lack of success of the attempt to reform and revive the troubled economy of the country.</td>
<td>In the early 1990s a newly independent Ukraine, seeking to revive and reform its troubled economy, embarked on a major privatization effort. The effort largely failed. This paper analyzes Ukraine's privatization effort and the reasons for its large-scale failure.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The thesis statement

A topic is something you want to talk about: the environment, or censorship of the arts, or wealth and poverty in America. A thesis, by contrast, is an argument, generally reduced down to one sentence. Many students think that all they have to do to get an essay off the ground is state the topic. For instance: *A key issue in America today is wealth and poverty.* But that is not enough. Two essays can have the same topic but make opposite arguments (the thesis statements are italicized):

**Topic: wealth and poverty in America**

**Argument 1**

*A key issue in America today is wealth and poverty. Despite the immense differences between how the wealthiest and poorest Americans live, American culture is not marked by rigid, long-standing class divisions. Through hard work, millions of Americans who were born poor have been able to achieve prosperity for themselves and their families. *America today is the most economically mobile country in the world.*

**Argument 2**

*A key issue in America today is wealth and poverty. Over the last twenty years, rich Americans have gotten richer and the poor have gotten poorer. At the same time, the poor have been increasingly blamed and abandoned by the rest of society. Once we tried to help poor Americans up; today, though we are richer than ever before, we blame the poor for their poverty and enact policies that will keep them poor.*

A strong thesis makes writing the whole essay easier, because it helps you see how the whole argument should be organized. Yet again and again students turn in essays with weak or absent or confusing theses. That's like starting a trip without a clear sense of where you're
going. My advice to students is simple: Start with a good thesis, and build on it. Before you get too far in writing the essay, find the thesis statement in the introductory paragraph. Can't find it? Problem. Stop, think, and come up with one. And, as you write, constantly check what you're writing against your thesis sentence. Are you still on track? If not, what went wrong? Do you need to refocus your writing, or revise your thesis? Writing is one of the best ways to think, so don't be too convinced that the thesis you began with is the one you should end up with once you've written a draft of your essay.

Okay, how do you come up with a good thesis? First of all by remembering that a thesis should capture your whole argument in one sentence. Here is a thesis that doesn't work well, because the writer wasn't really thinking of it as a developed argument. And reading it, we are unsure of what the argument is:

In the *Federalist* papers, the authors play off of two aspects of human nature, conflict and imperfection.

This is one of those theses that sounds good at first but needs more work. What does *play off* of mean? And are *conflict* and *imperfection* simply two things the student's paper will discuss, or are they meant to be understood as connected in some fashion? This student succeeds in telling us what she will write about (her topic), but she doesn't succeed in telling us what argument she's going to make.

Here is how the student ultimately revised her thesis, in a way that makes her argument clear:

The authors of the Federalist papers saw human nature as marked by conflict and fallibility.

Here is another example of an unclear or unformed thesis:

There is a common theme between *Federalist* essays #10 and #51: power.

All we have at this point is a topic. This writer has told us what she's going to write about, but not what her argument is. What do Federalist #10 and #51 say about power? Do they condemn or praise it? Do they propose to encourage or restrict power? Whose power are we talking about? And do these two Federalist papers make similar arguments about power, or do they merely share it as a topic? Here is one revision:

Federalist #10 and #51 both see conflict as the gravest danger to popular government. But instead of trying to eliminate conflict, they propose to harness its force.
What happened to power? The writer thought about her argument and decided that conflict was a more precise term for what she wanted to talk about.

Remember, your thesis is the most important sentence of the whole essay. It crystallizes your argument in a single statement.

The Middle

By the "middle" of the paper I mean the main section, after you've introduced your topic and stated your argument. The middle is where you actually make the argument, step by step. The middle is a minefield, where every step could shatter the delicate bond between your intended argument and your reader's understanding and sympathy.

Mediocre writers assume they'll be understood and blame the reader when they're not. Good writers realize that making a sustained argument and holding a reader's attention is as hard as juggling while walking a tightrope. The reader doesn't have your strategic, bird's-eye view of the whole essay. He's stuck on the ground, slogging through a morass of words, sentence after sentence, never knowing where the trail is leading and what lies over the next ridge or on the next page.

Thus as you write you need to keep thinking about your reader. Where will he think the argument is taking him, step by step? What needs emphasis or repetition? What must be explained, and what can be left implicit because it's obvious or has already been mentioned? What questions need to be answered? What objections need to be anticipated? Have you done all you can to weave together a coherent and sensible argument?

Paragraphs

The key building block of essays is the paragraph. A paragraph represents a distinct logical step within the whole argument. That step may be big or little; it may take one or ten sentences to lay out—but the key is that it is one step.

Thus there's no point in laying down as a rule (as one sometimes hears) that paragraphs should be four or five sentences long. That's probably a decent guideline for most paragraphs in student writing, but in good writing you'll find longer paragraphs and shorter paragraphs—some as short as a single sentence, if that's all it takes for that particular thought (use one-sentence paragraphs sparingly, but don't flinch from them when they're what you need).

Paragraphs are discrete steps in one's argument, but that doesn't mean that every step in the argument must fit within a single paragraph. Some complex thoughts may require so much
space to explicate that the resulting paragraph would be two pages long. In such cases, break into smaller units, looking to subdivide along some sensible and clear scheme.

The basic idea is simple but crucial: When you write a paragraph, you should know what it is meant to do. If your answer is simply, "Well, this paragraph helps explain my topic," then you haven't thought deeply enough. How does this particular paragraph contribute to the argument? What logical step does it make? Where does it fit in the overall chain?

### Topic sentences

Readers like to know why they're reading a particular passage as soon as possible. That's why topic sentences placed at the beginnings of paragraphs are a good habit. A topic sentence, as its name implies, states the paragraph's topic—it need not state the paragraph's particular argument about that topic. That means that questions can make good topic sentences.

Here, fairly at random, are several good topic sentences, all placed at the beginnings of paragraphs:

- A popular audience for science, and for technology, blossomed in Europe and America in the 19th century. *Examples follow.*
- The third and final area of Theban expansion was by sea in the Aegean. Here again the enemy was Athens. . . . *Detailed incidents follow.*
- When we see a play, what is it that we see? *An answer follows.*
- A special subcase of realist theories deals with the balance of power. According to this version. . . . *Elaboration follows.*

There's no iron rule that topic sentences must come at the beginning of paragraphs, but if you keep in mind that you're writing to be understood, you'll tend to put them there. That's what readers are used to, and that's what they find easiest to follow.

### Constructing paragraphs

Paragraphs should be constructed with some sense of internal order, whether through time, or space, or some other logical way or arranging information. Again, you have a lot flexibility in choosing an ordering scheme—as long as you choose something that will make sense to the reader.

It's common for writers to produce paragraphs that don't hang together, partly because we think as we write and don't always go back and revise thoughtfully. Here's an example, from
an essay on Machiavelli's opinion about Christianity. This paragraph is really pasted together from two pieces (marked by italics):

Christianity was not always weak and without vigor and war. When it was a new religion it extinguished the old, Paganism, in order to become the only one. In this, according to Machiavelli, Christianity behaved as every new religion does. The Christians burned the works of poets, threw down statues, and forbade Pagan teachings. Their mistake in this overthrow was to keep the language of the Pagans, Latin. The Christians translated the Gospels into Latin, and Christian political leaders put wrote their civil codes in Latin. So, although they had blotted out all of the Pagan ceremonies and teachings, all was not forgotten. The works of great Pagan thinkers were still studied because the language was not extinguished along with the rest of Paganism.

When the reader reaches the italicized portion, he gets a bit confused. The topic is the same, true—the early history of Christianity. But two distinct argumentative points are being made: (1) Christianity was once a fierce religion, and (2) Early Christians erred in not eradicating the Latin language. Each of these points deserves its own paragraph.

The best test for deciding whether a paragraph hangs together is to read its topic sentence and see if it reasonably covers everything you discuss in the paragraph.

### Linking paragraphs

In a good essay, each paragraph should have some logical connection to the one before it. When your reader moves from one paragraph to the next, he knows that he has reached a new step in the argument. But that's all he knows. Is this new step another in the same direction, or is it a change? You have to guide your reader with appropriate signposts. One powerful type of signpost that many students think they can't use in essays is a direct question. When you want to move from one part of the argument to the next, it can be useful to start by asking a question that refers to what you just said but gives you room to move on: *What does this mean?* or *Why does Plato think the noble lie is necessary?* or *What evidence is there for this interpretation?* Good sharp questions can guide your reader through your argument.

Another way to link paragraphs is simply to write in such a way as to force the reader to recognize the link. Here's how one writer started a paragraph. Notice that it only makes sense in context, and that the writer was confident enough not to repeat material from the previous paragraph or make the link too explicit:

The strange outcome was that the oil and energy crisis abated.

A less confident writer would have inserted a reference along these lines:
The strange outcome of the several years of economic crisis afflicting Western and Arab states was that the oil and energy crisis abated.

When a writer lacks confidence in her essay's coherence, she'll be tempted to say things like this:

Earlier it was mentioned that . . . as commented on earlier . . . as stated earlier . . . as stated before . . . as I wrote before

These are awfully weak constructions. In the same camp is the word also, which is vastly overused as a connector at the beginnings of sentences, where it rarely sounds very good:

Also, Touchstone tries to get out of marrying Audrey.

Also, the data show that the reaction slows down as the temperature falls.

These nervous pointers (their subtext is Have I lost your attention yet? Have I confused you yet?) are poor substitutes for good organization. Planning your argument and crafting coherent paragraphs that proceed step by step should make you feel able to dispense with such things. If on occasion you feel you have to use such a pointer, use a more conventional phrase like as noted above.

Transitions and pointers

Just as in crafting an essay you must fit its paragraphs together so they work with each other to make a smooth and well-developed argument, when you craft each paragraph you need to make sure the sentences work together. Paragraphs typically show some kind of development or movement, whether that movement is spatial (a physical description that, for instance, moves from left to right), temporal (a chronological description that, for instance, moves forward in time), or logical (a causal analysis that, for instance, explains how an action produced a result). In all of these cases, if you stick to your plan for the paragraph (remembering to amend the plan if your ideas evolve while you're writing), you'll find it fairly natural to write a sequence of sentences, one logically following another.

Problems arise when a writer turns in a new direction, but fails to signal carefully enough. Here, for instance, a writer relies on also to mark a turn from the advantages to the disadvantages of her topic, with poor results:

A competitive culture can be useful in motivating employees and reaching performance goals. But sometimes competition adds too much stress, and harms employees' ability to work effectively. Also, if employees become too wrapped up in beating their coworkers, where does customer satisfaction fit in?
A competitive culture can motivate employees to reach performance goals. But competition has its downsides, too. If it creates too much stress about reaching goals, it can harm employees' ability to work effectively. And if employees become too wrapped up in beating their coworkers, they might neglect the overriding goal of customer satisfaction.

The new second sentence acts as a roadmap, preparing the way for specific points.

A useful way to help your reader follow the logical movement within a paragraph (or between paragraphs, for that matter) is to use transitions to mark turns in the road, and pointers to remind him where he's going. Using transitions and pointers can help you keep a paragraph—and the whole essay—organized and easy to follow. Here are common transitions and pointers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>and</th>
<th>then</th>
<th>so</th>
<th>on the other hand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>or</td>
<td>before</td>
<td>and so</td>
<td>against this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>also</td>
<td>after</td>
<td>consequently</td>
<td>at the same time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>furthermore</td>
<td>still</td>
<td>often</td>
<td>nevertheless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because</td>
<td>similarly</td>
<td>frequently</td>
<td>in short</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>since</td>
<td>likewise</td>
<td>sometimes</td>
<td>in the same way</td>
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<tr>
<td>for</td>
<td>though</td>
<td>at times</td>
<td>finally</td>
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<tr>
<td>if</td>
<td>another</td>
<td>but</td>
<td>in other words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>indeed</td>
<td>for instance</td>
<td>yet</td>
<td>last of all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in fact</td>
<td>for example</td>
<td>however</td>
<td>first, second, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>all in all</td>
<td>therefore</td>
<td>although</td>
<td>on the contrary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>now</td>
<td>thus</td>
<td>despite this</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

### Pronouns and relative adjectives

Another linking strategy is to make use of words that help us keep our sense of direction—pointers and transitions. Some of the most useful pointers and transitions are also some of the least appreciated by students: pronouns and adjectives to show possession and relation, like *he, his, this, which, they, and it*. The definition of a pronoun is a word that can stand in for a noun. It always points to some noun or thing called the antecedent (*ante* is a Latin word meaning *before*: the antecedent goes before the pronoun). Relative adjectives are similar: they show relation or ownership (*my* book, *his* argument, *its* strengths).
Pronouns and relative adjectives perform the invaluable function of calling your reader's attention to some noun you have already used without requiring you to use it again. This is an economical way of reminding your reader of your argument. Many students tend to see these simple words as too humble for college writing, and prefer to invoke the full weight of a name or other noun. But a humble pronoun can sharpen a sentence:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>Revision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Even after Antony remarries, Cleopatra is still an integral part of Antony's life.</td>
<td>Even after Antony remarries, Cleopatra is still an integral part of his life.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Further revision might try to build around an active verb.)

Here's another example, a paragraph about Moses that sinks under the weight of its repetitions of its proper names, the Israelites and Moses:

The Israelites were unhappy with Moses and wished he would leave them alone. When God sent the ten plagues, Pharaoh was forced to let the Israelites go. The Israelites then eagerly and willingly followed Moses from Egypt. The Israelites would not have been so willing to follow Moses if God had not intervened and shown that he supported Moses. The Israelites also showed how easily they would turn their backs on Moses when they were being pursued by the Egyptians. They panicked and again cursed Moses for bringing them out of Egypt.

Reading this is like trying to run in snowshoes. Here's a possible revision, which besides showing how useful pronouns can be also suggests some other ways to improve the passage's flow::

The Israelites did not immediately accept Moses' vision. But once Pharaoh relented and let them depart, they eagerly followed Moses. However, when the Egyptians pursued them they at once lost faith in Moses, and cursed him for bringing them out of Egypt to die in the wilderness.

Note the other changes made in this passage, all contributing to a quicker and livelier read (things like using active verbs, building clauses around their logical actors, and ending on the obvious point to emphasize).
Another example of stiffness due to fear of pronouns:

**ORIGINAL**

Hamlet fights with his identity while trying to fulfill the ghost's demand for revenge. He loves to learn, and ask questions about everything. But Hamlet's search for knowledge eventually conflicts with his sense of duty.

**REVISION**

Hamlet fights with his identity while trying to fulfill the ghost's demand for revenge. He loves to learn, and ask questions about everything. But his search for knowledge eventually conflicts with his sense of duty.

Are you starting to see how pronouns and relative adjectives can help your prose sound freer? Here's a list of some useful relative and demonstrative adjectives and pronouns. All are perfectly acceptable in academic papers; all are "formal" in any reasonable sense:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>this</th>
<th>which</th>
<th>them</th>
<th>many</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>that</td>
<td>he</td>
<td>him</td>
<td>most</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>these</td>
<td>she</td>
<td>her</td>
<td>several</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>those</td>
<td>it</td>
<td>all</td>
<td>some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who</td>
<td>they</td>
<td>few</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Pronoun pitfalls**

Pronouns, recall, refer to antecedents, to nouns that have gone before. A mistake you see in a lot of writing is to use a pronoun whose antecedent is unclear, or that lacks an antecedent altogether. In this passage, the pronoun they isn't set up well:

Machiavelli feels that Paganism favored freedom. They praised glory and war, unlike Christians. More inclined to fight fiercely, they were better able to defend freedom.

The writer here thought that referring to Paganism established the idea of Pagans. But it doesn't, and readers will be a bit confused and then irritated at having to make this connection themselves. The revision is simple:

Machiavelli feels that Paganism favored freedom. Unlike Christians, Pagans praised glory and war. More inclined to fight fiercely, they were better able to defend their freedom.

How can you tell when it's okay to use pronouns and when you should repeat the noun? Four rules of thumb:
1. Make sure it's clear what the antecedent is.

2. Use the noun, not a pronoun, if there's some confusion about what the antecedent would be:

   **Original**
   
   Leonardo studied in Florence in the famed workshop of Andrea del Verrochio. He had been trained as a goldsmith, and this proved to be a major influence on Leonardo's work.

   **Revision**
   
   Leonardo studied in Florence in the famed workshop of Andrea del Verrochio. Verrochio had been trained as a goldsmith, and this proved to be a major influence on Leonardo's work.

If the nouns differ in some obvious way—one is plural, for instance, and the other singular—then you usually don't need to worry.

3. As long as there's no uncertainty, you can go quite a long way within a passage before repeating the noun.

4. Finally, do use the noun instead of the pronoun at significant turning points in passages—the beginnings (and often the ends) of chapters, sections, and paragraphs. Get used to using pronouns within logical units, and using their antecedents at beginnings and ends.

**The Ending**

In oratory, the peroration is the conclusion of a speech or discourse, where the speaker recapitulates his argument and presses it a final time with renewed vigor. The ending of a speech or an essay is not the time to raise a new substantive point: it is the time to remind, to reflect, and to send off the reader with a satisfied feeling. Somehow the very best endings possess a near-paradoxical quality—a sense of closure and completeness, and yet at the same time a suggestion of new open spaces to explore, armed with the ideas or information the essay has provided.

**The point of an ending**

Over the years that I've read student essays, I've come up with a scale to rank endings. The worst essays just stop, vaulting the reader out onto the pavement like a car crash. Clearly in some of these cases the writer ran out of time or collapsed from exhaustion. Mediocre essays end with a more or less complete summary of the essay’s argument, reminding the reader of key points. Good essays provide some sense of order and emphasis, moving from a mere summary list to a thoughtful recapitulation of the argument. And the best essays manage to
look outward, drawing some larger conclusion, pointing to a significant implication or opportunity for further research.

Here's a weak ending. All it does is recapitulate each point the essay has made—it's a shopping list, not a conclusion:

Coriolanus has many personality traits, traits that explain his greatness as well as his downfall. His pride is well-earned, but is also the cause of his volatile relationship with the plebeians. Coriolanus has an ingenious military mind that is signaled by his glorious military career as well as his ineptitude as a politician. While his passion drives him toward superiority, it also causes him to lose control of his emotions. Finally, Coriolanus' compassionate side is illustrated by his relationship with his mother. However, Volumnia is able to manipulate her son as a result of his devotion. Coriolanus refuses to change his personality or his actions to please anyone but himself or his mother. His refusal comes under intense pressure, but is also endorsed by various characters throughout the play. In the end, the opinions of others become meaningless as Coriolanus is isolated from the country he fought so hard to defend.

What's missing is any real sense of summation, of a conclusion with heft. The last sentence, on Coriolanus' isolation, does gesture toward an interesting conclusion. But as written it rushes by too quickly, at the end of an overlong paragraph. Revision would seize on isolation as the key idea and build the paragraph's structure around it. Note that to do this the writer is going to have to think a lot more deeply about the topic and the argument. How do the various things mentioned here (and presumably discussed in the essay) tie to Coriolanus' isolation? Does Coriolanus grow more isolated over the course of the play? Why? (Note the unhelpful passive voice, is isolated, in the original—by now, we recognize this as a way of ducking the question of agency.

As typically happens, serious revision would lead here to rethinking, more thinking, and better thinking—maybe even, with luck and pluck, to a bit of wisdom.

One more weak ending:

Although Mark Antony seems like an unimportant character at the beginning of Julius Caesar, he develops into an extremely shrewd and powerful ruler who successfully utilizes Machiavellian strategies such as plotting political moves, gaining the acceptance of the common people and never deferring war.

As with the previous conclusion, this simply reiterates the points made in the essay. It lacks any larger vision or context; it does not broaden the essay's argument in any fashion. The revision tries to do that:
Mark Antony seems, at the beginning of *Julius Caesar*, a shallow and unimportant character. But by the end of the play he has been revealed as bold, shrewd, and ambitious, the play's most thoroughly Machiavellian character. Has he changed—or has Shakespeare merely allowed us to see beneath his mask? And was his love for Caesar genuine, or opportunistic? Shakespeare poses these questions about Antony without providing easy answers. Contemplating Antony, we come to see *Julius Caesar* as a deeply political play, a play that challenges and teaches us about the nature of politics and the temptations of power.

### Closing the circle

An excellent way to impart a sense of unity to an essay is to return at the end to a quotation, image, or statement that the essay began with. We can call it *closing the circle*. Done well, closing the circle conveys a sense of order, elegance, and thought that can make a reader smile with appreciation. Here's an example from another essay on *Coriolanus*. You might contrast it with the balder ending above:

**BEGINNING**

"Boy of tears," Aufidius taunts the Roman general Coriolanus near the end of Shakespeare's play (5.6.100), and the vehemence of Coriolanus' response suggests that Aufidius has hit the mark: there is something childish and sad about this fiercely proud warrior. . . .

**ENDING**

By the end, Coriolanus has thrown away not only his old identity but his new one as well. The "boy of tears" is left with only his immature fury and sullen isolation. His final act of mercy leads not to reconciliation but to further suffering, loss, and death.

Here's an example from an essay about a visit to an isolated Caribbean island. The writer begins with a little detail that captures the island's isolation and slow pace: a tardy mail boat, the only regular way to get on or off the island. Then, at the end, he comes back to the opening image:
The mail boat should have been here hours ago. From my stool in Blind Sonny Lloyd's tiny waterfront bar, I can see past a stand of coconut palms to the wooden deck where the boat was to have picked me up.

As it turns out, I'm the only passenger on the mail boat this time. I stash my gear in a tiny cabin and later recall something Percy had told me after our lobster dive as we waded ashore under the lavish Bahamian sun. "Think about what kind of world we'd have if every kid on the planet could grow up on an island like this. There'd be no more violence, mon. No more hatred. Just love for everybody. A big, big love."

If only Ragged Island could gobble up the rest of the world, in other words, instead of sliding slowly in the opposite direction. We could all be stranded together. Marooned as a way of life. The world as one big island. And we wouldn't need mail boats any more.

As these examples suggest, a skilled writer doesn't merely repeat exactly what was said at the beginning. The trick is to echo the words or image one began with while adding some new twist or perspective to broaden the perspective.


Thy firmness makes my circle just,  
And makes me end where I began.  
John Donne (1572-1631)