

Academic Writing: Writing an Effective Conclusion

A good conclusion reminds the reader of your main conclusions, as well as the fact that you have answered the question, and closes your essay in a satisfying way.

A good conclusion does not bring up new points in the argument – those belong in the main body of the essay – but it can open out to show how the essay might be connected to larger questions.

Three Conclusions: An Exercise

Below are three conclusions to an essay in response to the question “**How does Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s novel *The Home-maker* examine gender roles of the 1920s?**” [this is the same imaginary essay as in our exercise on Introductions]. Consider the questions after each example and, if you like, check against our answers at the end.

Conclusion No. 1:

In conclusion then, *The Home-maker* is definitely about gender roles in the 1920s. Those gender roles have obviously changed since then, but anyone interested in finding out about what they were in the 1920s can go read the novel to find out. In summary, Fisher examines the different roles of what women and men were supposed to do in this novel.

Q1: Does this conclusion feel like a satisfying closing?

Q2: Is the reader reminded that the writer has answered the question (“How does Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s novel *The Home-maker* examine gender roles of the 1920s?”)?

Q3. Is the reader reminded of the general conclusions of the essay?

Q4. Does the conclusion open out to any larger considerations?

Conclusion No. 2:

To conclude then, Fisher’s novel *The Home-maker* takes a critical look at stereotypical gender roles. The first part of the essay looked at what these roles were in the 1920s. When Evangeline went out to work, she found that she loved working outside of the home. The reaction of her husband Lester to the circumstances after his accident was the discovery that he loved being at home with the children. Fourthly, the children were happier being looked after by their father than by their mother. It is very clear, therefore, that through her novel Fisher was questioning whether society might not be improved if people abandoned prescribed gender roles. *The Home-maker* brings the reader along in

considering these questions. It is still a powerful novel – how much more powerful must it have been to readers in the 1920s?

Q1: Does this conclusion feel like a satisfying closing?

Q2: Is the reader reminded that the writer has answered the question (“How does Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s novel *The Home-maker* examine gender roles of the 1920s?”)?

Q3. Is the reader reminded of the general conclusions of the essay?

Q4. Does the conclusion open out to any larger considerations?

Q5. Is this a better conclusion than Example 1?

Conclusion No. 3:

Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s *The Home-maker* subtly leads its readers to question gender roles. It does this by presenting us with very believable and full characters, each of whom is faced with certain decisions. Evangeline is forced to look for employment outside the home – as we have seen, a very unusual choice for a married woman in 1928 – but she soon finds her job far more fulfilling than being a “home-maker” and full-time mother. Once Lester has decided to try looking after the children at home, he comes to love this role as much as his wife enjoys her job. The children also come to accept their parents’ new roles. Each character must make a decision, and his or her decision in turn leads to a new attitude about what is possible and correct for men and women to do in life. Because the characters’ inner struggles are so well portrayed, the reader is carefully brought through what would have been a shocking role-reversal for the 1920s. Although society has changed in many respects, it is significant that this book is now one of Persephone Books’ best-sellers.¹ This is no doubt because it is so well written. It would be interesting, as well, to know if today’s readers still find its questioning of traditional gender roles in any way challenging.

¹<http://www.persephonebooks.co.uk/pages/titles/index.asp?id=25> (18 June, 2010)

Q1: Does this conclusion feel like a satisfying closing?

Q2: Is the reader reminded that the writer has answered the question (“How does Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s novel *The Home-maker* examine gender roles of the 1920s?”)?

Q3. Is the reader reminded of the general conclusions of the essay?

Q4. Does the conclusion open out to any larger considerations?

Q5. Is this a better conclusion than Example 2?

Conclusion No. 4:

Fisher’s novel still has the power to move today’s readers to question society’s gender roles. It does so by having each of the main characters re-examine his or her own preconceived notions about what men and women “should do”. After his accident Lester must reconsider whether he can still be of use to his family even if he is no longer able to be the main breadwinner. He – and his children – discover that he is an even better “home-maker” than his wife had been. Similarly, Evangeline finds happiness in the job she must take, because it is a good outlet for her organisational skills. Lastly, both of the children love and appreciate how their mother and father each blossom in their new role. One of the

important aspects of the novel, which has often been overlooked, is the implicit use of the Montessori philosophy of learning through doing. The scene in which Lester watches his daughter learn to break an egg is extremely effective.¹ Although it is not necessary to understand Montessori methods to appreciate this scene, it is a key example of how Fisher's favoured educational theory pervades the novel. Montessori believed that the teacher should "let the children teach themselves".² The scene shows Helen thinking through the process ("Suppose I hit it too hard, and it all spurts out?" p. 170), and then finally succeed in cracking the egg, but the reader probably will not realise that this scene is in fact an enactment of Montessori's philosophy. Fisher's novel does challenge gender roles, and goes beyond this as well.

¹Fisher, *The Home-maker* (London: Persephone Books, 2000), p. 169-172.

²Bloom, "Primary Prevention and Early Childhood Education: An Historical Note on Maria Montessori," *The Journal of Primary Prevention* vol. 24, no. 3 (Spring 2004), p. 194.

Q1: Does this conclusion feel like a satisfying closing?

Q2: Is the reader reminded that the writer has answered the question ("How does Dorothy Canfield Fisher's novel *The Home-maker* examine gender roles of the 1920s?")?

Q3. Is the reader reminded of the general conclusions of the essay?

Q4. Does the conclusion open out to any larger considerations?

Q5. Is this a better conclusion than Example 3?

Our answers:

Conclusion No. 1:

Q1. No – it's too short for one thing. For another thing, the reader doesn't have to be told "In conclusion" or "In summary": the reader will see that they have reached the last paragraph of the essay, and will therefore know it's the conclusion.

Q2: No. The question is "How does Dorothy Canfield Fisher's novel *The Home-maker* examine gender roles of the 1920s?". The reader is reminded that the essay was about gender roles in *The Home-maker*, but there is no indication that the essay answered the question of *how* the novel examined gender roles.

Q3. If the main argument of the essay was that *The Home-maker* deals with gender roles, then this short conclusion would seem to be a summary of that argument. However, if this was the case, the essay has not answered the question set. Also, telling one's reader that "anyone interested in finding out about what [gender roles] were in the 1920s can go read the novel to find out" seems to be an admission that the essay hasn't fully come to grips with the question.

Q4. No.

Conclusion No. 2:

Q1. Overall we think it does, although we would prefer to take out the obvious phrase "To conclude then," and simply begin the paragraph with "Fisher's novel *The Home-maker* takes a critical look at stereotypical gender roles." It is also still on the short side for a concluding paragraph.

Q2. Yes, the reader is reminded that the essay answers the question of how Fisher examines gender roles in the novel.

Q3. Yes.

Q4. Yes, in the last sentence ("It is still a powerful novel – how much more powerful must it have been to readers in the 1920s?").

Q5. Yes.

Conclusion No. 3:

Q1. Yes.

Q2. Yes. The reader is gently reminded of several threads of the writer's argument: the importance of believable characters, the fact that each character is faced with a decision, the idea of the characters having an inner struggle, and the argument that each character's decision leads to a new attitude towards traditional gender roles.

Q3. Yes.

Q4. Yes, it informs the reader that *The Home-maker* is a best-seller almost 90 years later, and asks the question of whether contemporary readers' own assumptions about gender roles are challenged. This might be an interesting topic for further research, but is not part of the argument of the essay itself.

Q5. Yes, insofar as it articulates more fully the various points of the argument (see above, Q2).

Conclusion No. 4

Q1. Not entirely, because it goes into so much detail about Montessori methods that it seems to be a new point in the argument. The discussion of Montessori should have been incorporated into the main body of the essay.

Q2. Yes, but not nearly so fully as in Conclusion No. 3.

Q3. Not really – the reader could be forgiven for thinking that the overall conclusion was that Fisher was a proponent of the Montessori method.

Q4. It doesn't open out onto larger considerations – it opens out onto a focal point of analysis of the novel (the role of Montessori methods in the novel), which belongs earlier on in the main body of the essay.

Q5. No.