

there's still only a *single major point*. "One main contention per paragraph"—it's a very sensible guideline to follow. If you don't follow it, your points will tend to get lost, and so will your reader.

7 Instead of viewing the opening sentence of each paragraph as a thesis sentence, as you've probably been taught to do, try this: View it as a bridge sentence whose prime function is to convey the reader over into the new paragraph. More than one student has remarked to me that that's the single most valuable tip he's carried away from his writing conferences with me. I say this only to underscore the difference it can make in your prose style. Below are a number of paragraphs opened from an often-reprinted article by Bergen Evans called "But What's a Dictionary For?" (first published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1962). They will illustrate the bridging technique graphically:

- a What underlines all this sound and fury?
- b So monstrous a discrepancy in evaluation requires us to examine basic principles.
- c Yet wild waits arose.
- d More subtly, but persuasively, it has changed under the influence of mass education and the growth of democracy.
- e And the papers have no choice.
- f And so back to our questions: what's a dictionary for, and how, in 1962, can it best do what it ought to?
- g Even in so settled a matter as spelling, a dictionary cannot always be absolute.
- h Has he been betrayed?
- i Under these circumstances, what is a dictionary to do?
- j An illustration is furnished by an editorial in the *Washington Post* (January 17, 1962).
- k In part, the trouble is due to the fact that there is no standard for standard.

Even out of context, these sentences suggest how skillfully Evans is guiding his reader, building bridges for him, persuading him. The reader never comes to a new paragraph wondering, "Where am I? Is this the Grand Canyon?" To repeat the point I made a few moments ago: Continuity doesn't magically happen, it's created.

Sense of closure - refer to main point
Point out implications
also how that is
6 Closers
- Dim Sum

The most emphatic place in clause or sentence is the end. This is the climax; and, during the momentary pause that follows, that last word continues, as it were, to reverberate in the reader's mind. It has, in fact, the last word. One should therefore think twice about what one puts at a sentence-end.

F. L. LUCAS

What's going on in the mind of a skilled writer as he approaches his final paragraph? Perhaps we can peer inside one and see. Here's a skilled writer now—our capital-punishment student again. He seems strangely altered, though. In fact, he would appear to be preparing for capital punishment himself. His eyes look glazed. I think we're catching him at a very bad moment:

"This is ridiculous—my brain feels like it's turning to mush. Hell, I think I'll just stop here. The piece is virtually done anyway—I've made my main points. Besides, who's going to know the difference?" (Enter Conscience and Common Sense. They begin beating back Faigue.)

"No, I guess I can't quit yet. Watson wouldn't accept an argument that merely stops. He's going to want to see the thing *end*—he'll want to enjoy a sense of closure. He once said that's a basic aesthetic desire in virtually all of us. 'Every reader wants his final reward . . .'

"Then, of course, there's the matter of what he'll be able to recall. Since my memory certainly has its limits, I'm sure his does too . . . Well, if that's the case, the impressions he has of this piece are bound to be strongly conditioned by the last sentences he reads. My opener may have disposed him to read eagerly, and hopefully my middle paragraphs have sustained his interest, but my final paragraph may well be the chief thing he carries away with him. That's certainly the way

it is with the last minute of a basketball game, or the last kiss at the door. Hmm. I can see that I've got to make it memorable—as powerful as my opener, if I can.

“But I wonder how I should slant it toward him? I suppose, if he’s anything like me, by the time he’s gotten this far, he’ll be tired. He’s bound to welcome a final gathering up of my argument in a form that can be grasped with a single effort of mind. This would also leave him feeling that my argument really does hang together. He mustn’t have any doubts on that score. I want him utterly convinced.”

“But wait a minute—he’ll be bored if my closer does nothing but mechanically recapitulate earlier points, and especially if I repeat too much of my earlier phrasing. That would make him feel that I’m merely going through the motions. It would also make him feel that he’s stopped learning things. I’ve got to keep him interested right to the end. I’ve got to leave him convinced that my mind is still blazing with ideas.”

The closer our student finally devises is half-summary, half-conclusion, similar to a prosecutor’s closing appeal to the jury. Almost without seeming to, he neatly sums up the high points of his evidence, and explains clearly and simply why his argument is reasonable. He also takes care to point out its important implications, so that the reader will be convinced that the argument is worth serious thought. He makes the whole paragraph relatively self-contained and packed so that it could serve as a pretty fair substitute for the essay itself, as indeed it may in his reader’s overworked memory. And he finishes off with a sentence that has such a satisfying air of finality that his last period seems almost superfluous.

For a long paper—say, ten pages or more—this formula for a closer is probably ideal. In fact, it’s almost obligatory, since you will have given your reader a volume of ideas to digest. Unless your presentation of them has been unusually coherent, he’s apt to be left seeing trees but no forest. He really needs a systematic wrap-up.

With shorter papers, though, you should feel free to take liberties with this formula, particularly if your next-to-last paragraph has already gathered up many of the threads of your argument. You certainly don’t want to insult your reader’s intelligence. There remain, however, three imperatives, no matter how brief your essay:

- 1 Get your main point (which may be your final point) in sharp focus.
- 2 Gratify your reader with at least one last new idea.
- 3 Give your ending emotional impact.

The four closers quoted below satisfy these three imperatives beautifully. All are from short essays written for the same upper-division Shakespeare course, and all deal with the same subject, *King Lear*. This, I should point out, is no coincidence. It wasn’t until these students got to their last essay assignment of the semester—on *Lear*—that any of them learned how to write a powerful closer. When you read them, you’ll probably find this hard to believe. Each seems the product of a truly natural talent. Appearances deceive, though. What looks so natural is really the effect of repeated practice, careful revision, and considerable reader feedback, not just from me but from their classmates as well. I suspect that a semester spent with Shakespeare also had something to do with it. As you read these closers, remember to read for manner as well as message:

After his defeat and capture, Lear’s transformation of character is complete. To be a prisoner of his daughters should be the most humiliating experience in a king’s life, yet we find Lear expressing real happiness. Because he is with Cordelia, the longing for power and loyalty has been replaced with a desire for love and compassion. At last Lear sees a love without price and power. He actually looks forward to being a prisoner with Cordelia:

Come, let’s away to prison,
We two alone will sing like birds i’ th’ cage.
When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we’ll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies. . . .

(V.iii.8-13)

The kind of love that he now wants is the antithesis of the worship that his other daughters promised him. Lear has discovered a human love based on sharing and feeling, and found that it is worth far more than crowns or kingdoms. [The tragedy of *King Lear* is that Lear’s ideal universe discovers itself in a prison rather than in a kingdom.] For when Lear had the power to preserve love he could not see it, and when he had the wisdom to see love he could not preserve it.

reiterate main point of mine to what does
implications closers 57 add up
What does
57 add up
do?

be done
finally

emphatic
words.

So, by a series of occurrences very close to the core of the man, Lear, this king becomes aware of life just as it is lost to him forever. The only non-static character in the play, Lear becomes the tragic one. The tragedy is one like saving a man's life so that he may be executed. But, in that saving, Lear is, if only briefly, whole, magnificent, wise.

Even though Lear changes into a wise, compassionate, and fit ruler, his sorrows begin anew. The sentimentalist's phrase "poetic justice" holds no meaning for Shakespeare. Ruin wrought in the old king's heart and brain is irreparable, and the tornado that whirled him to his doom carries with it the just and the unjust. Lear's little golden pause of peace, when he and Cordelia reunite, followed by the intolerably piercing scene in which he bears her dead body out of prison muttering that they have hanged his "poor fool," shows that even the virtuous suffer—not at the hands of the gods, who are indifferent, but at the claws of beastly humans. In *King Lear*, the consequences of imprudent action were never followed out to a grimmer end.

It seems we can really only speculate as to what Shakespeare is trying to say about life in *King Lear*. There are no religious morals or Elizabethan motifs jumping out at us like handy crutches. Perhaps Shakespeare is trying to convey in Lear an inner human dignity in suffering. Lear, the exalted, suffers with the common. He shares with all of his brothers the ability to suffer. Suffering is his bond. His ability to feel the pangs of rejection, defeat, and total disillusionment enables Lear, who has "ever but slenderly known himself," to achieve a spiritual stature in death denied him in life.

You can appreciate from these examples that what F. L. Lucas said about the strategic importance of a sentence-end is equally true of an essay-end—in fact, probably a good deal more true. A weak sentence-end can always be recouped by a strong following sentence; a weak essay-end cannot. Knowing this, many experienced writers take the precaution, during the early drafting stage, of setting aside a couple of choice ideas or phrases for use in their closer. That's a smart policy. Try it next time yourself and see whether you don't agree.

7 Diction

The case for conciseness

Less is more, in prose as in architecture.

DONALD HALL

In composing, as a general rule, run your pen through every other word you have written; you have no idea what vigor it will give your style.

SYDNEY SMITH

Most of us tend to write as if we were going to be paid a nickel per word. We've been conditioned, I suppose, by theme assignments in school calling for more words than we have ideas. That inevitably gets us in the habit of phrase-stretching—a hard habit to break. Then, too, it's easier to think in long, ready-made phrases, which have the added attraction of sounding elegant. What businessman, for instance, doesn't feel indebted to "please be advised," "thanking you in advance," and "in reference to yours of . . ."?

This habit of thinking in prefab phrases slowly dulls our sensitivity to words as words. It's inevitable. We may hear someone say, "This is where my head is at," and pride ourselves on our recognition that the phrase is slang, but we'll probably not notice that it's also redundant. (What does *at* say that *where* doesn't already say?) If you think in terms of months, you're only half-conscious of days. If you think in terms of phrases, you're only half-conscious of words.

Good writing really begins with a profound respect for words—their precise denotations, their connotations, even their weight and music, if you will. Once you develop a respect for them, you will find yourself developing a passion for seeing them used thriftily. Why use three or four words if one will say the same thing? Why say "in