WRITING THE CONCLUSION

WRITING SKILLS

WRITING THE DISSERTATION

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The conventions of a conclusion can slightly vary depending on the nature of your dissertation and the expectations of your school or department. Nevertheless, the conclusion is typically broken down into two main parts:

1. **Summarise** and **synthesise** your main findings and/or discussion points and how they directly respond to, and address, your research question(s) and/or hypotheses.

2. Broaden out your discussion to demonstrate the impact and relevance of your work to the **wider, relevant context**. This is where you would consider potential avenues for future research, possible recommendations for relevant practitioners (if relevant) and respond to the question, 'what do we now know that we didn't before?'

**Definition: What is a conclusion?**

The conclusion is the final chapter of the dissertation. It's not simply a token repeat of the previous chapter. Instead, it serves to reinforce your main argument and findings, before considering the wider implications of your research. This represents your final opportunity to shape your reader's understanding of the topic, bringing the different elements of your work together to consolidate new knowledge.

**How to write a conclusion?**

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**Tips**

- **No new information** – the conclusion isn’t the place for new information, such as data or theories.
- **Word count** – the conclusion should be roughly 5 to 10 per cent of the entire dissertation word count, although this can depend on the nature of your dissertation.
- **Avoid excessive detail** – only include essential information and data that you feel is necessary for the conclusion.
- ‘**Mini essay**’ – imagine that your reader only reads the abstract, introduction and conclusion before deciding whether to read the entire dissertation. What essential information does your reader need to know to grasp what your dissertation is about and what it shows?
**INTRODUCTION**

The conclusion is the final chapter of the dissertation. It serves to reinforce your main argument and findings, before considering the wider implications of your research. Along with the introduction, it's often the shortest chapter in a dissertation, but is a chapter in its own right and should be given due care and attention. Even so, the conclusion of a dissertation is sometimes hastily thrown together, culminating in a perfunctory and uninspiring end to such a substantial piece of work. Just like how nobody likes a bad ending to a movie, you want your conclusion to be an accurate and positive reflection of your dissertation that leaves your reader with a clear and satisfying end to the work. As part of the *Writing the Dissertation* series, this guide covers the essentials of writing a strong conclusion, giving you the necessary knowledge, tips and guidance needed to leave a positive impression on your markers! Here's what to expect:

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**WHAT IS THE CONCLUSION?**

The conclusion isn't simply a brief recap of your previous chapters. Instead, the conclusion revisits your primary research purpose – your research questions and/or hypotheses – and summarises and synthesises the main research findings, or areas of discussion, to reinforce how your dissertation responds to that purpose: how does it answer question X or prove argument Y to be correct. The conclusion then moves beyond the immediate confines of your research to engage with the wider impact and relevance of your work. That is to say, you feed the work you have completed back into the wider context to emphasise how your research has advanced our understanding of this area. This is your final opportunity to leave a positive and lasting impression on your reader, so it's important that your conclusion captures the essential information in your dissertation and emphasises its value in the relevant profession or field of research.
Imagine that your reader only reads the abstract, the introduction and the conclusion before deciding whether they choose to read the entire dissertation. This should help you to write the conclusion because you need to ensure that your conclusion (and your abstract and introduction) includes the essential information that you want your reader to take away with them. You don’t need excessive detail (see Common mistakes and what to avoid for more).

STRUCTURING A CONCLUSION

Whilst the conclusion of a dissertation is a chapter in its own right, it’s important to consider the role that the conclusion plays in the entire structure of your dissertation. You might recognise the shape below – what is sometimes called an 'hourglass' structure. This represents a typical structure for an essay or dissertation.

**Introduction and literature review** broad to narrow – eases the reader into the discussion by introducing them to the broad situation within which your research sits. Narrows the focus through the literature review whilst maintaining a direct interest in the wider research context. Arrives at a narrow focus towards the end by clearly stating what your focus is, what research problem you are going to address, how you are going to address that problem and what your argument and findings are.

**Main body (methodology, results and discussion)** narrow focus – provides the finer details of your dissertation by isolating particular aspects to discuss and scrutinise, such as the details of how your study was designed. Whilst the discussion engages with relevant literature, it's driven by the results of your study with secondary material used to contextualise the meaning and significance of your findings.

**Conclusion** narrow to broad – reinforces your main argument and findings and then broadens out by considering the wider implications and relevance of your work on the relevant profession or field of research.

Think of the introduction and conclusion chapters as the bookends of your dissertation – they frame the entire dissertation and, in doing so, share a close relationship. That being said, the structure of the introduction is reversed for the conclusion, and vice versa. As evident from the shape, whilst the introduction moves from broad to narrow, the conclusion moves from narrow to broad.
We’re going to break the conclusion down into two main parts:

01 A **summary** and **synthesis** of your main findings or discussion points that directly respond to, and address, your research question(s) and/or hypotheses. For this reason, it’s often useful to start by briefly repeating the research problem you’ve addressed. This constitutes the narrow part of the conclusion;

02 A broader engagement with the impact and relevance of your research to the **wider, relevant context**. This constitutes the broader part of the conclusion.

Let’s look at both in more detail.

### 01 Summary and synthesis

Synthesis means to bring different ideas from different places together to formulate a perspective on something. To write an effective conclusion for your dissertation, you need to do more than simply repeat the main points and findings of your research. Instead, you need to summarise and synthesise [definition in graphic] your main findings and points of discussion, forming a cohesive picture for your reader that brings the different elements of your research together. This helps your reader to understand how you have reached a certain answer, or why you think your argument is correct.

It’s often useful to start with a brief recap of the research problem before stating how your dissertation has responded, in some way, to this problem by synthesising the main findings and discussion points.

For example: *Despite extensive research on the application of tool X, this dissertation has noted an absence of rigorous research on how this tool can be applied to demographic Y. Considerable research demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of applying this tool when working with various demographics, particularly A and B, but the different demands associated with demographic Y restrict the suitability of these findings for this age group. In response, this dissertation has…*

Following this, you need to outline how your dissertation has responded to this problem by summarising and synthesising your main findings and/or discussion points and reinforcing your main argument. Try summarising every one of your main findings or discussion points – keep it brief (one or two sentences) – and then, where possible, try and condense and connect this information to form a brief portrait of your dissertation. See **Annotated example** for more on this.
Once you have reinforced your research focus and your argument by summarising and synthesising your main findings, you need to relate your research to a wider, relevant context. This might include:

• **‘Returning’ to the introduction** - As stated earlier, you conclusion shares a close relationship with your introduction with both acting as bookends that frame your entire dissertation – like the first scene and last scene of a film. For this reason, you need to return back to your introduction by revisiting the broad, but relative themes that opened your dissertation as a way of contextualising your argument and results. Ask yourself the question, 'what do we now know that we didn't at the start?' The argument and findings won't be a revelation to your reader, but framing them in this slightly broader context helps to reinforce the significance and contribution of your work. This brings your work ‘full circle’ and creates a neat symmetry to your work – a narrative thread for your reader to follow.

• **Recommendations for future research** - Where necessary, it's a good idea to include some suggestions for relevant future research that you think will help to further advance our knowledge of the research area. Don't commit too many words to this. You simply need to state what contributions to the research field might be worth pursuing in the future and how this might further enrich our understanding of the topic. This serves to emphasise that your work is part of an evolving landscape of research, thus engaging with the wider context.

• **Recommendations for practitioners** - Depending on the nature of your research, it might be necessary to suggest some recommendations for relevant professionals and industry practitioners based on your findings. Remember these are only recommendations and they must be consistent with your findings. Briefly mention how each recommendation would serve to address and, potentially, solve a problem faced by professionals. This helps your reader to understand the real-world implications and relevance of your work.

The end of your conclusion should provide some sense of closure, but should not signal a definitive end – this is not the end, as such, but rather the end of this very specific piece of research. Imagine that another researcher is going to read your work and develop the ideas you've explored further. In this case, the end of your conclusion no longer constitutes the end of this research area – it's a contribution to a growing field. Striking the right balance can be tricky, but try to bring your dissertation to a close for your reader without giving the impression that the research area is 'closed off.'
By focussing on the Arab Spring uprising, this dissertation has demonstrated the ways in which social media animates forms of civil empowerment through collective political action. Whilst other examples could have been used, this dissertation has highlighted how participants in the Arab Spring coordinated a strategic network of communication, drawing on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in both distinct and interrelated ways. By adopting social media in such a way, the Arab Spring not only demonstrates that social media can have a profound impact on forms of civil empowerment, but can also become a powerful political tool when deployed in a strategic and coordinated manner.

As outlined in Chapter 3: Methodology and Chapter 4: Results, this study collected quantitative data, such as the number of likes, retweets and views, to measure the reach of social media interactions on the Arab Spring uprising during a three month period. Qualitative data was also collected through the language and rhetoric employed by citizens posting comments, and the content of videos posted on the social media sites in question. This mixed-methods approach, along with the focus on three social media platforms, provided a triangulation of data that strengthened the depth of the research and allowed for a more nuanced portrait of how social media, when deployed in a coordinated way for a particular event, forms an interconnected network of channels through which information can flow freely. As evidenced by the quantitative data, with posts and retweets reaching their millions, the use of social media had a cumulative power with the Arab Spring by spreading the civil unrest and galvanising support for the cause.
Future research should also further explore the tension between social media and political censorship. Indeed, despite social media’s obvious potential as a tool for civil empowerment, Chapter Five: Discussion also pointed to the dangers of how oppressive governments can respond to the apparent threat of civil activism through aggressive forms of censorship. Moving forward, social media platforms must defend the freedom of its users to engage in socially active ways, and understanding the intersection between social media and political censorship is crucial to defending this freedom. Only by preserving this freedom can social media, and the internet in general, continue to realise its primary function as an open source of communication that evades the restrictive censorship of traditional gatekeepers.

Whilst the Arab Spring only represents one case of the relationship between social media and civil empowerment, this case study shows how the Arab Spring played an influential role in the mobilisation of the hashtag movement and the digitisation of civil activism. This is most clearly exemplified by the Me Too movement, supporting the fight against sexual harassment and assault, and Black Lives Matter, fighting against the racial oppression of black people. In examining the role of social media on these and other such cases of civil activism, perhaps a systematic comparison between social media and traditional forms of media, such as newspapers, would provide further opportunities to assess the relationship between social media and social activism.

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The conclusion isn't the place to repeat detailed statistics or retrace the finer nuances of an argument. You simply need to reinforce the main findings and the essential information in your dissertation. Only you can determine what you think is a necessary level of detail in your conclusion, but look at the following two examples as a guide:

The results showed a considerable increase of 76 per cent from Sample A (6 per cent) to Sample E (82 per cent) with samples C to D and samples D to E both showing the largest increase of the study with a 23 per cent rise.

The results showed a considerable increase from Sample A to Sample E. As expected, Sample A started low with only 6 per cent. Sample B then showed an increase of 20 per cent, with Sample C then reaching 36 per cent to show a further increase of 16 per cent. Sample D furthered this trend, reaching 59 per cent. Sample E then reached 82 per cent, showing a 23 per cent increase from the previous sample.

You should avoid presenting any new information, such as primary data or theories, when writing your conclusion. Any primary or secondary material you deem important enough to state in the conclusion (although avoid excessive detail as stated above) should be evident in your results and/or discussion chapters.

Firstly, the chapter heading 'Conclusion' serves as a clear indication to your reader!

Secondly, your conclusion should signal a rhetorical shift in your writing to a more reflective register. For example:

'This dissertation has considered the complex ways in which…'

The use of the present perfect tense here signals this shift to a reflective register.

Don't state your core argument and main observations for the first time in the conclusion chapter. This is sometimes mistakenly employed as a way of maintaining a sense of mystery before the grand reveal at the end – like the dramatic third act of a play or the final twist in a film. Academic writing is not driven by the same intrigue as narrative storytelling. Instead, the 'end' or conclusion in a dissertation or written assignment should be clearly signposted early on – the abstract and the introduction – as a way of focusing the reader's attention.
FAQs

How long should the conclusion be?

Roughly 5-10% of the dissertation's word count. So, for a 10,000 word dissertation, you should aim for anything between 500 words to 1,000. You should, however, be flexible with this. As always, it depends on the nature of your dissertation and the expected conventions in your department or school. It's always worth seeking advice from your supervisor, but it's safe to say that – along with the introduction (again dependent on the nature of the dissertation) – it's often the shortest chapter in the dissertation.

Should the conclusion include references to secondary literature?

Yes, where relevant. As noted in Common mistakes and what to avoid, you shouldn't be bringing in new data, theories or information, which means you will likely revisit previously discussed work in light of your own findings and argument. Although you have already mentioned and cited the original work, it's good practice to cite them again. This is also imperative in cases where you have cited more than one piece of work from the same author or authors. So, for example: 'These findings support the work of Jones (2010) in which X and Y were both seen to…'

Should the conclusion be written in first person or third?

It depends what you've been using throughout your dissertation – it's important to be consistent. Typically, third person is used in academic writing, although first person is accepted in some disciplines, whilst certain genres, such as reflective writing, demand the first person.
SUMMARY AND CHECKLIST

The conclusion is your final chance to leave a positive impression on your reader, so it's important that you conclude in a clear and engaging manner. Rather than simply repeating the main content from your previous chapters, you should be summarising and synthesising your main findings and discussion points and bringing them together to reinforce your central argument and respond to any research questions or hypotheses you have. You should then engage with the wider, relevant context by returning back to where you started in your introductory chapter to answer and consider the question, 'what do we now know that we didn't before?' Here's a final checklist for writing an effective conclusion.

Remember that not all of these points will be relevant for your conclusion, so make sure you cover whatever's appropriate for your dissertation.

The asterisk (*) indicates any content that might not be relevant for your dissertation.
FURTHER SUPPORT

Academic Skills website
library.soton.ac.uk/sash

Academic Skills Hub
Drop in Mon-Fri, 10-12 or 2-4, Hartley Library

Training and Workshops
library.soton.ac.uk/sash/workshops