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Closers

The most emphatic place in a 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? Let's revisit our capital-punishment student just as he reaches that juncture. Perhaps we can listen in . . .

Oh-oh, he looks bad—eyes glazed, body leaden. We appear to be catching him at a very low moment:

"This is ridiculous—my brain's turning to mush. Maybe 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 beat back Fatigue.)

"No, I guess I can't quit yet. Buckley wouldn't accept an argument that merely stops. He'll want to see the thing *end*, to enjoy a sense of closure. He once said that's a basic aesthetic desire in 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 . . . If that's the case, his sense of this piece is bound to be colored by the last sentences he reads. My opener may have disposed him to read eagerly,

and my middle paragraphs may have sustained his interest, but my final graf 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 *have* 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 handily. 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 I imagine he'll be bored if my closer simply recaps earlier points, and especially if I repeat my earlier phrasing. He'll feel I'm merely going through the motions. He'll also feel that he's stopped learning things. I've *got* to keep him hooked to the very 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. He neatly sums up the high points of his evidence, re-explaining 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 substantial. He makes the whole paragraph self-contained and packed so that it could serve as a 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 satisfying finality that his last period feels unnecessary.

For a long paper—say, ten pages or more—this formula for a closer is ideal. In fact, it's obligatory, since you will have given your reader a volume of ideas to digest. Unless your presentation 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 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. Focus on your main point (which may be your final point).
2. Gratify us with at least one last new twist or phrase to make your point memorable.
3. End with emotional impact.

The four closers quoted below satisfy these 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 to write a powerful closer. When you read them, you may 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 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.

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 whirls 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.

What F.L. Lucas, at the opening of this chapter, said about a sentence-end is probably even more true of an essay-end. 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.