

Exits and entrances

We have been speaking recently of entrances, the word-portals we construct to bring our readers inside. Some can be majestic, like old museum doors; others, modern and bright, more chrome and sliding glass than creaking timber.

William Zinsser has been our guide as we spoke of crafting these entrances and the passages beyond them, so that the traveller, having found his way in, then finds the way ahead well lit and easy to follow, and is inclined to stay a little longer, when he might otherwise have hurried elsewhere.

But eventually the journey is finished; all has been revealed, and it is time to lead him through the exit. The entrance we crafted was important. But so is the ending.

The problem with endings is that many writers don't know when they get there. Any editor will tell you that for every author in search of an opening there are a dozen in search of an ending.

Courtesy of Mr Luurman's *Great Gatsby*, many Pesapersons will have recently heard one of the best last lines ever written: *So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.*

Obviously, as geoscientists, our scope in crafting these final lines is less than for a non-fiction writer, but there is still plenty of scope for creative choice. The point is to find the best way to finish our message.

In *On Writing Well*, Zinsser is spot-on when he laments the lingering impact of the school lessons about structuring an essay into the introduction, the discussion and the conclusion.

The lament is not that this is poor advice; it is actually good advice. The lament is that the idea of a conclusion is taken so literally by many writers: they insist on a capital C Conclusion in the closing lines.

In scientific papers, beyond an introduction and some discussion of objectives and context, there is usually a description of the data and a discussion of the interpretation. This discussion should flow naturally into the main conclusions, either within the discussion or a separate section.

The problem comes when the reader, happily approaching the moment he will glide through the exit refreshed and informed, is confronted without warning, in the very last paragraphs or sentences, with an 'In summary...' or 'In conclusion...'

What follows will invariably be a repeating of what has already been said.

The good news for a young writer is that these expressions may be taken as alarm bells. When you see that you have written those words in your closing sentences, you should stop writing and rethink.

The other fail-safe guide to knowing you have come to the end is when you can't think what to write because everything you think of, you've already said. At that point, you need only a well-chosen sentence or two to wrap-up the essence of your thesis and send your reader on his way.

(Nowhere is the useless conclusion more obvious than in a presentation. Anyone who has been to a conference lately will recall a talk where the conclusions were arranged as bullet points over 2, 3 or even 4 slides – which the presenter proceeds to read verbatim while everyone squirms or heads for the exit. This is largely caused by speakers following too literally the silly adage that a presentation should be structured to tell the audience what you will be telling them, then tell them; then tell them what you've told them. I suggest that wastes considerable time – time you don't have in a 20 minute talk. But more of that another time.)

The University of Columbia, in their advice to authors of scientific papers (www.columbia.edu/cu/biology/ug/research/paper.html), suggest that the best ending is a one-sentence summary of the main conclusions.

I won't disagree with that but I would suggest that a better closing sentence would be a summary of the relevance or implications of the main conclusions.

Referring again to our hypothetical Goldwyer Shale paper, I would argue that it was written to encourage exploration. The data we presented and discussed will have highlighted the Goldwyer's generative potential and been summarised as the crux

of our conclusions. So, we are free in our exiting sentences to say what we mean by it all: more exploration in the area of the mature Goldwyer source is needed.

If the aspiring writer takes the time at the beginning to think about the main point of the paper or report, then these closing remark(s) will be clear and, what is more, the whole theme and flow of the paper will be known before he starts writing.

That means that the introduction can begin with the ending in mind and will quickly set the data and discussion in context. The reader will know where he is going and the concluding remarks will let him know he has arrived.

I like to use the heading 'Concluding Remarks' rather than 'Conclusions', wherever appropriate, because it allows more latitude and makes it easier to reflect on the implications of the discussion, and close-out the theme.

That is why I like exits. They give that extra latitude. Even in an otherwise very factual scientific paper, the final sentences allow the writer a brief editorial comment.

There may be a quote that is appropriate. I once used Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* last line to end an APPEA paper, for instance – though I concede it was about conservation and development, not the Goldwyer Shale. More often than not, it is simply the place to say, as you bow out, what you want the reader to know and do.

I suspect I like exits more than I like entrances; and I really like entrances. I often have one or the other in mind long before I start and sometimes it isn't clear whether I have the opening or the closing line.

I suggest to young writers that the opening and the closing sentences should loop one on the other whenever possible. In that way the theme and the tone of the beginning will be there at the end.

Whatever the style of door we opened at the beginning – the formal timbered museum or the sassy chrome – the reader will be pleased to see it again as he exits, and will enjoy the exit the more so, for having first enjoyed the entrance.

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