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Happy Endings

I'll tell ya something right up front. Endings are hard. Everybody struggles with them. Some writers rewrite their endings 20 times. That's just the way it is. Of course, there are things we can do to make it easier. And that's what we'll talk about here. But make no mistake: endings are, for most of us, the hardest things to write.

When you're trying to come up with a good ending for a piece, there are three things you need to think about. A good ending should:

- **Feel finished.** A good ending has a certain feel to it, and that feeling is one of completeness: there's nothing else the writer needs to say, the piece has been wrapped up, summed up, and tied up so completely that the reader feels completely satisfied.
- **Give the reader something to think about or do.** Readers like to ponder a bit at the end of a piece, they like to have something to consider, something to reflect on, something to take with them for the future. Ideally, your ideas will linger in their mind long after they've read your last sentence. That's the test of truly effective writing.
- **Meet your reader's expectations.** With the beginning and middle of your piece, you've set up certain expectations in the minds of your readers. Your ending has to live up to those expectations, it has to fulfill the promise of everything that has come before.

Too often, readers feel let down by the ending. And that can ruin their entire experience of a piece. It's not that readers are mean people with impossibly high standards. In fact, it's quite the opposite. Your readers want you to have a great ending so badly that they often can't help but disappoint themselves. This is just another reason why endings are so important and why good endings are so hard to write.

One Last Really Good Ending

I saved the best one for last. One of my favorite kinds of endings is, in my humble opinion, so cool that it deserves a bit of an introduction. Reading a piece of writing is like taking a little trip. The writer picks you up at the beginning and carts you off to different places with each new idea. Finally, you arrive at your destination. With luck, you've not only enjoyed the ride, you appreciate where you've been dropped off at the end. But wouldn't it be nice if the writer could get you all the way back home to where you started in the first place? That's what a "wrap-around" ending does. It manages to finish off the piece by using the beginning again at the end.

16. End with what you started with. (A "wrap-around" ending.)

Here's an example of a wrap-around ending from a very clever second grader. Her story is a simple one about watching a parade. But the way she works the beginning and the end belies her age in its sophistication.

Boom! The trunk slammed. Bang! The car door slammed as we got out of the van. Buses lined up on the sidewalk. The screeches of the buses got annoying. Screech! Screech! We walked and walked until we found a place to sit for the parade. I saw a Grease van and someone threw me a daffodil. The daffodil petals were soft, and it smelled pretty. A Titanic float sailed by. All schools had cheers. One school's band was Star Wars. A dummy was shot out of a cannon. It made me jump! We ate snacks at the parade like sandwiches and juice and carrots. They were good. The parade was two hours. We sat on a blanket. Things blew everywhere when the float went by whew-clunk. Finally the parade was done. We put the blanket in the trunk. Boom! It slammed again and we drove away as I thought how much fun I had.

Not too shabby for a seven-year old, eh? (I corrected some of the spelling here, but the words are all hers.) Actually, her teacher and I had been doing some ending lessons in her class and the wrap-around ending was one of the ones we spent time on. Still, I think she was the only student who tried it.

Another wrap-around example. On the next page you'll see another example of a wrap-around, this time in a research paper by a sixth grade writer. In this case, the end doesn't mirror the beginning quite as literally as was the case in the "parade" piece. Here, the writer brings back just one small but memorable part of the first paragraph and uses it to end his paper on a playful note.

Endings That Should Not Be Used

Some endings are worse than others. Having already told you how hard I think endings are, I certainly won't be too grumpy if you occasionally write a bad one. I have — more than once. That being said, however, there are certain endings we should probably all try to avoid.

1. The “The End” ending.

The End

This not a real ending, merely the announcement of one. It's fine for children's stories where your audience might be too young to realize that you're done, but for mature readers it's a let down.

2. The “I hope you liked my story” ending.

Well, that's all I have to say. I hope you liked my story!

If I did like the story, this ending would quickly help to change my opinion of it. And if I didn't like it, I doubt I'll like it any better just because the writer hopes I will.

3. The “Tell ‘em what ya told ‘em” ending.

In this paper, I have just discussed blah, blah, blah...

I don't know who started this but I sure wish they'd stop. Somewhere, a long time ago, somebody started telling kids that their papers should look like this: (Introduction) “Tell ‘em what you're gonna tell ‘em.” (Body) “Tell ‘em.” (Conclusion) “Tell ‘em what ya told ‘em.” Now, by my count that means you have to write everything three times and your poor reader has to read everything three times. This seems excessive if not pointless. If you've already told me something, and if I'm any kind of a reader at all, I certainly don't want to hear about it again, let alone two more times.

4. The “It was only a dream” ending.

I was just about to... when I woke up. It was only a dream.

I know it's tempting to use this ending when you're writing a really long story that you don't know how to finish. But readers usually hate it when stories end this way.

A Glossary of Happy Endings

1. Advice. (A) If you cannot swallow and your throat is puffy, then you have strep. You should get lots of rest. And get a shot because the shot will make you better faster than the medicine. **(B)** If you're thinking about going skydiving, take my advice: stop thinking.

2. Big feeling. (A) Oh Yeah! Here is some thing really funny. My hair still smells like smoke. I love campfires. **(B)** Finally the parade was done. We put the blanket in the trunk. Boom! It slammed again and we drove away as I thought how much fun I had. **(C)** When it's time to go, none of us wants to leave. As I say my good-byes, I think of all the fun we had, and what fun we will have next time.

3. Remember. (A) Remember, even though the Mariners are losing doesn't mean they're a bad team. **(B)** So always remember to keep an extra key somewhere. You never know when you might need it.

4. Do. (A) There were 300 families with no homes because of the fire. They couldn't put out the fire because they had no sprinklers. I am mad because fires can kill people. Next time buy some sprinklers. **(B)** Down with the dolls! Get rid of every store that carries them! Let the revolution for a Barbie-free America begin! **(C)** If you care about the lives of your children and the quality of your community, then vote for tomorrow's school levy. It's the best way to guarantee a bright future for everyone. **(D)** Make a commitment to getting in shape today. Turn off the television, put down whatever it is you're reading (unless it's this essay, of course), start living a healthy life today. You'll be glad you did.

5. Future. (A) Last year was definitely the hardest, craziest year of my life. And I loved it! Things are going great. I never knew the incredible feeling of accomplishing things that in the past seemed impossible—not only with school, but with my entire life. Every day is another chance to do something great. And now I have the confidence and motivation to conquer anything that is put forth in front of me. I feel I owe this to many things and to many people, but most of all I owe it to myself. Now I think about the consequences of everything I do and say. And this helps me make better decisions, decisions that help me build a better future. The future! For the first time I'm looking forward to it. **(B)** Everybody's always talking about adults being good role models for kids, but maybe we should be models for them. Maybe we could teach them a few things about how to have a good time and enjoy life. It's worth a try. I'd hate to think that the way growing up seems to me now is the way it's going to be when I get there.

6. Lesson. (A) I learned that I shouldn't lie because it gets me into worse trouble. In the future I'm not going to lie. If I have a problem, I'm going to tell someone about it, and ask for help. **(B)** From the wars in Korea and Vietnam, our country learned painful but valuable lessons that will guide our foreign policy well into the next century and beyond.

7. Recommendation. (A) I recommend this book for readers who like adventures and interesting stories. **(B)** Even after all the bad things that happened, it was still a fun trip. If you go there, I can't guarantee you won't have all the problems we did. But I can recommend this vacation to any family who wants a real challenge. **(C)** Even though the food was pretty good and it wasn't too expensive, I'm afraid I can't recommend this restaurant to everyone. It was very noisy and the service was slow. I don't think it would be a good choice for families with small children.

8. Main idea. (A) Chores aren't the worst but they're definitely not the best! **(B)** An actor acts. A hero helps. The actor becomes famous and the hero does not. And that's just it: Heroes don't care about the credit, they just care.

9. Main idea and implications. (A) Henry Ford's revolutionary thinking affected the lives of many Americans. The Ford Motor Company became one of the largest industrial companies in the world, and a household name. Opportunity to be mobile in a Ford automobile gave the open road to the ordinary American. Businesses boomed in the hard times of the Depression because the auto gave the opportunity for work to many. The American dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was more possible in the auto. Americans today still have a love affair with cars thanks to Henry Ford and his revolutionary thinking.

10. Effect. (A) While all this happened, another close neighbor had witnessed the incident and called 911. It was decided afterward that the dog had contracted rabies and he was soon put to sleep. I was given a series of shots and a few stitches only, and after a couple of years, my leg healed, but the scars remain on both the inside and out. **(B)** The internment of the Japanese Americans was one of the lowest points in United States history. We did it out of revenge and out of hate. The fear that we felt after the attack at Pearl Harbor was well founded, but the internment was not the way to overcome it. The internment hurt so many people so deeply and really accomplished nothing in the short run. In the long run, it brought nothing but shame upon us.

11. Question. (A) As this miracle season comes to a close, the one thing on every fan's mind is this: "Can they do it again next year?" **(B)** Will the human race ever see the irony in destroying the planet that is their only home? How much more evidence do we need before we take global warming seriously? **(C)** I guess what still bothers me is how confused I am about what happened. If I was ever in that same situation again, would I act the same way, or would I do something different?

12. Sequel. (A) As soon as I walked in the dining room I smelled trouble. I looked down at my plate and saw what I smelled! Brussels sprouts! I gave a loud tragic moan and knew there was going to be another story written by Alex Carter. But for now, I would feed my Brussels sprouts to the fish. **(B)** And so ends another after school adventure, or misadventure, I should say. Stay tuned for the further misadventures of a kid with not enough homework to keep him out of trouble and way too many wild ideas.

13. Reflective evaluation. (A) So I guess that I lived happily ever after except that I couldn't walk for the rest of the trip. Maybe that camp ground wasn't so cool after all. **(B)** From that point on my life has been good. Except for the chores. I think my mom got the better end of the deal on that one. **(C)** BRRRIINNNNGGG! The bell rang! I pulled on my backpack, tore out of the room, sprinted down the stairs, sped down the hallway, and bounded out the door. I dashed home and grabbed a snack. I popped a video into the VCR, turned on the TV, and relaxed. Ah-hhhhh! What a glorious day! **(D)** My whole world seems to be more on track now that she's gone. My self-confidence, my general attitude has improved immensely. I do miss her sometimes. How could I not after three years of friendship? All I can think is that I was a good friend to her. Our relationship didn't survive, but we'll always have the laughs... and the tears.

14. Wish, hope, dream. (A) Now, I'm looking at John, over the mess on the kitchen table, wondering if he's all right, because he's only eight years old, and that was a lot of throwing up to do. Then he gets to go out and play with his friend, just like he wanted. I feel a little cheated. Would I have gotten to go back out if that was me? I really wish he could have the experience of a younger sibling, just so he would know how I feel. **(B)** I hope someday that I can be a good parent just like my mom. But until then, I'll just work on being a good kid. **(C)** Even now, years later, I still dream of what my life might have been like. **(D)** I think that Jay Buhner is a true hero. The Seattle Mariners would be lacking an excellent right fielder without him. I hope he stays in Seattle for the rest of his baseball career.

15. Tribute. (A) I salute you, Lieutenant John Olson. May your bravery and courage be passed on so that someone else may look up to you and yours, and honor them as I do. **(B)** John was the best kid I ever knew. There when I need him, gone when he knew I needed to be alone. And I feel darn privileged of having the extreme honor of being his blood-brother. I just wish we could have carted him along when we moved here to Canby. God bless his soul. I'm never going to forget him.

16. Wrap-around. (A) Boom! The trunk slammed. Bang! The car door slammed as we got out of the van. . . . We put the blanket in the trunk. Boom! It slammed again and we drove away as I thought how much fun I had.