
Writing your Conclusion

UFS Postgraduate Newsletter
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One particular aspect of academic writing is how to write your conclusion section. We will discuss this issue and suggest some exercises which can help you with this process, based on a book called *Becoming an Academic Writer* by Patricia Goodson (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2013), which is a guide to all different stages of the academic writing process. While the section of Goodson's book about writing conclusions focuses on academic journal articles, much of the advice is also relevant to writing theses and dissertations. The first thing to note is that there is a slight difference between a 'conclusion' and a 'discussion'; in the context of journal articles, some journals request one or the other, or both. As they are similar, many writers see these terms as interchangeable, however it's worth looking at recent articles in the journal you are intending to publish in to check what the journal wants. Your conclusion section is vital as, in the article context, many readers may only read the abstract and conclusion in full, and skim-read the rest. So it's important here to have a tightly written opening paragraph which contains your key idea in the opening sentence, to make sure the reader is aware of what your work is about straight away. While it's easy to assume that your findings speak for themselves, particularly if you have been

assume that your findings speak for themselves, particularly if you have been immersed in your research for a long time, the reader will not necessarily see what you do in your findings/data. Thus you should spell out your findings and their implications as they will not necessarily be self evident to the reader. Furthermore, the applications that you perceive will not necessarily be those that the reader sees. We will now consider some exercises from Goodson's book which may help you with the process of writing your conclusion. The 'reader' of a journal article can be seen as analogous to the examiner of a thesis or dissertation.

Exercise 1: Brainstorming your key findings

You may find it useful here to set a timer for 10 minutes. List your thoughts about the main findings in your research in bullet point form. Then brainstorm any other questions that your research brings up (you can again use bullet points). Think like a reader would – what questions would they have if they are reading your study for the first time? Begin to answer these questions – in doing so you interpret your findings for the reader. You can also use this exercise to pose new questions of your own which appear.

Exercise 2: Link your findings to other research

It's a good idea to start your conclusion

with a summary of your study's most important findings, using concise sound bites, which refresh the reader's memory. You can then link your findings to other studies in your field, and discuss how similar or different your results are to other authoritative research on the topic. This helps the reader to see the bigger picture, and joining the dots between your research and that of others starts a discussion/conversation about the topic. In this exercise, draw up a grid/matrix with nine columns (the last five columns will be used in the next exercises). In the first column, write down each of your most salient findings. In the second column, put down references which agree with your findings, and in the third column put down references which disagree. Then, in the fourth column, write down how these other references converge or diverge with your own.

Exercise 3: Relating your findings to theory

The conclusion/discussion section is where you go beyond description to interpret your findings. This involves telling the reader what your findings mean, explaining why you may have obtained these, rather than other, results, and clarifying what the results point to. Thus, you will explain why you obtained the results you did, and this will be how your study contributes to theoretical thinking in your field. In the fifth column of the matrix from the previous exercise, list the theoretical perspectives which may help your readers understand each particular finding. In the sixth column write down how your findings relate to that theory – how they support or disprove it.

Exercise 4: the implications of your research

We now consider the implications of your research – now that you know your research findings, what can be done with this information? This can be summarised as the reader asking 'so what?' about your research. In columns seven, eight and nine, consider the question of 'So what?' applied to your main findings, in terms of 'So What... for practice?', 'So What... for Future Research?', 'So What... for Theory?'

Exercise 5: the limitations of your research

Most articles will include a paragraph or two discussing the limitations of the research; keep this fairly brief and only discuss the most important limitations. Many authors seem to rush through this section so it's worth giving it some more thought. Create a new grid with 4 columns. In the first column, write down any problems or difficulties you had during the project, and in the next column put down 'Yes' or 'No' as to whether each issue affected your results. Then in the third column write down the ways you dealt with each issue (you only need to do this for the 'Yes' issues), and in the last column write down a positive characteristic of your study which counterbalances the problem. While you should highlight the limitations of your study, you don't want your reader to only remember the negatives so you should also try to balance problems with the contributions your study makes. Help the reader to see the big picture about what your research brings to the topic as a whole, despite its problems.

